

## **DOCTORAL THESIS**

### **Capturing the Cancan body politics from the Enlightenment to Postmodernity**

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**Capturing the Cancan: Body Politics from the Enlightenment to Postmodernity**

**by**

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PhD**

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## **Abstract**

The subject of this thesis is the cancan – a dance form that emerged in Paris in the 1820s, and that has undergone a number of transformations in its continued performance, both live and onscreen, over the last two hundred years. The thesis focuses on particular historical moments during which the cancan's embodiment of social tensions caused it to gain visibility as a site of both desire and moral panic, often centring on the supposedly uncontrollable bodies that it creates and performs. These moments are characterised by the employment of various legal, mechanical, digital and critical technologies to capture the cancan's disorderly performance. The complex relationship between the cancan, these technologies and the shifting historical, cultural and political contexts which animate them, form the crux of the discussion.

The cancan's emergence and development as a live dance form in the nineteenth century, its relation to the invention of cinema in the 1890s, its popularity in narrative cinema of the 1920s and 1950s, and its revival in Baz Luhrmann's film Moulin Rouge! (2001), are analysed from a postmodern perspective, in which modernist hierarchies of high and low, elite and popular, mind and body, are reinterpreted as structures of power. It is argued that at these moments the cancan becomes a particularly salient mediator of the conflict between rational and irrational body politics that had its origins in the Enlightenment. By embodying irrationality, and later, various intersections of rationality and irrationality, cancan performers and spectators make manifest alternative constructions of the body and society that may be utopian, dystopian, or both. In doing so, they

participate corporeally in the ongoing negotiation of post-Enlightenment body politics. The thesis thus seeks to demonstrate the importance of popular cultural forms such as the cancan for reconstructing cultural histories in postmodernity.

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## Introduction

The subject of this thesis is the cancan – a dance form that emerged in Paris in the late 1820s, and that has undergone a number of transformations in its continued performance, both live and onscreen, over the last two hundred years. The thesis focuses on particular historical moments during which the cancan's embodiment of social tensions caused it to gain visibility as a site of both desire and moral panic, often centring on the supposedly uncontrollable bodies that it creates and performs. These moments are characterised by the employment of various technologies – legal, mechanical, digital, critical – in order to contain or capture the cancan's disorderly performance. The complex relationship between the cancan, these technologies and the shifting historical, cultural and political contexts which animate them, form the crux of the discussion.

This research topic grew out of an interest in Baz Luhrmann's film Moulin Rouge! (2001). Fascinated by the historical and cultural complexity of the web of references that the film weaves, I initially planned to trace this web from the bodies presented on screen to the dance practices and contexts to which they refer – the cancan, the tango, Hollywood musicals, Bollywood musicals, and so on – investigating how the films' intertextuality plays out on and between live and cinematic dancing bodies. I was particularly interested in how this intertextuality operated in relation to the various normative and transgressive bodies visible in the film, such as Christian, the male, white, middle-class bohemian writer, and Chocolat, the black, male Moulin Rouge dancer.

However, starting this research with the cancan of the 1890s, I realised that many of the issues that had interested me in Moulin Rouge! – reference across historical disjunctures, the relationship between liveness and mediation, transgressive identities – were present in the history of the cancan itself, a history that had not previously been constructed from a postmodern perspective, nor been afforded much attention within dance studies. The focus of my research therefore shifted to the cancan. Although the research began with the famous *fin-de-siècle* incarnation of the dance at the Moulin Rouge cabaret in Montmartre, Paris, to which Luhrmann's film refers, it also extended back into the cancan's history prior to the Moulin Rouge, and forward into its twentieth-century manifestations on film, which frequently referred to the Moulin Rouge cancan, as well as undergoing various transformations. While the cancan continued to be performed live throughout the twentieth century, my research does not address the live cancan beyond the 1920s. By this time, the live cancan had already proliferated into a range of historically and geographically specific practices, which each warrant their own research project. Rather, after addressing the nineteenth-century emergence and development of the cancan in Paris, this thesis focuses on the relationship between the cancan and technology that extends from the birth of the dance, through the invention of cinema, early cancan films, and the popularity of the cancan in cinema of the 1920s and 1950s, to Moulin Rouge!. Academic supervision by scholars within the disciplines of both dance studies and film studies enabled me to develop a balanced approach to the encounter between bodies and technologies that the cancan has provoked over the course of its history.

My resolution to investigate the cancan was hardened by the fact that it has been persistently ignored in dance studies as a subject of serious academic enquiry. The only book-length work focused entirely on the dance is written by a freelance writer (1998), and even brief considerations of the cancan by dance scholars are few and far between (for example, Guest, 1947; 1952; Savigliano, 1995; Camus, 2001a; 2001b, see section 1.3). This failure to address the cancan may reflect its status as a threatening form of popular or low culture. Low culture, and its opposite high culture, are used throughout this thesis to indicate positions on a social scale that emerged in its modern form during the Enlightenment. It is argued here that in the eighteenth century this scale was redefined as an historical progression from primitive irrationality (low) to civilised rationality (high). High rationality was associated with the separation of the mind from internal bodily urges and external influences, whereas low irrationality signified the rupture of boundaries between mind and body, inside and outside. The low became a potential source of contamination, but also fascination, for those who considered themselves to be at the higher end of the scale. The cancan, it is argued, emerged as a performance of low irrationality, and therefore a potential threat to the boundaries that preserved rational high culture. In the same way, the dance has perhaps been regarded as a threat to the credibility of dance as a high art worthy of academic attention.

Nevertheless, it is precisely the cancan's low cultural status that makes it an important object of study. The privileging of dance forms regarded as high art, such as ballet and modern dance, in dance studies, has resulted in a dance history canon that is highly selective and biased. For example, the canon of nineteenth-

century dance history focuses on the emergence of romantic ballet and the later developments in Russian ballet. This is followed in the early twentieth century by the birth of modern dance (for example, Clarke and Crisp, 1981; Anderson, 1986; Au, 1988). Such a timeline is not only partial, but makes the transition from classical balletic control to the ideal of freedom of movement in modern dance rather sudden and surprising. The inclusion of low cultural dance forms, such as the cancan, in this timeline, however, helps to fill out the picture (others who have contributed to this project include Allen, 1991; Hazzard-Gordon, 1992; Lhamon Jr., 1998; the dance history canon has also been challenged in Dils and Albright, 2001; Carter, 2004). The ideal of freedom of movement no longer appears to arise from nowhere, but is cultivated in low dance forms such as the cancan, before its transformation into high art in modern dance.

Furthermore, by studying low art forms, the processes through which the very distinction between high and low culture developed and persisted, come into focus. For example, it is argued here that the cancan is the product of a process through which, in the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, bodies became the primary signifiers of rationality and irrationality, high culture and low culture. Rational bodies were defined as bounded, individuated, and under the control of the mind, whereas irrational bodies were unbounded, unindividuated and out of control. These terms are drawn from Dorinda Outram's (1989) study of body politics in the French Revolution. The term body politics is used in this thesis to indicate both the political connotations of material bodies, and the political body of the nation, concepts that have been closely intertwined in Europe and the United States throughout the nineteenth and

twentieth centuries. This thesis argues that throughout its history the cancan has allowed both performers and spectators to perform various rational/irrational bodies, and thereby negotiate past, present and future body politics. In the cancan the physical construction of rationality and irrationality, and the politics of this process, are performed, and therefore become visible.

This critique of the politics underlying social structures that were designated ‘natural’, universal and rational in the Enlightenment and modernity, is typical of the postmodern perspective (see section 1.5). In this thesis, the history of the cancan is redeployed for postmodern purposes, by revealing the processes of exclusion, repression and subversion through which post-Enlightenment cultural politics have operated. My research draws on the work of scholars who have conducted this rereading of the past through a consideration of the history of the body, such as Michel Foucault (for example, 1990; 1991; 2001), as well as early pioneers of this approach, such as Norbert Elias (1897-1990) (1994) and Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) (1984). French literature scholars Rae Beth Gordon (2001b; 2001a; 2003; 2004) and Felicia McCarren (1998; 2003) have considered the politics of historical performing bodies in some of the very contexts with which this thesis is concerned – in Gordon’s case, the late nineteenth-century French cabaret culture which re-emerged in early film, and in McCarren’s, nineteenth-century French dance culture and early twentieth century machine culture reflected in film and modern dance - but without focusing on the cancan (see section 1.3).

In dance studies this perspective is beginning to be developed by scholars such as Marta Savigliano (1995), whose work on the tango in various colonial and postcolonial contexts briefly mentions the cancan. Savigliano draws on and develops perspectives from postcolonial studies, a broad, diverse research area in which the postmodern questioning of hierarchical politics is applied specifically to colonial and postcolonial hierarchies. Postcolonialism has developed particular frameworks for these analyses, such as the notion of otherness, which both Savigliano and I employ. The ‘other’ is a person/body/group/category characterised by its difference from the ‘self’, and against which the self is defined, which must be excluded or repressed in order for the self to justify its position at the top of the social hierarchy (see Bhabha, 1994b). However, by virtue of its exclusion and repression, the other is also often a figure of desire and fascination. The body of the nineteenth-century cancan dancer epitomises this desirable other, although the history of the cancan also demonstrates the ways in which the self/other dichotomy tends to simplify more complex relationships.

My particular reconstruction of the history of post-Enlightenment body politics, built around the central thread of the cancan, is influenced by my background in anthropology. For example, Mary Douglas’ (1966) structuralist study of the relationship between social constructions of the boundaries, margins, hygiene, orderliness, and disorderliness of the physical body and that of the body politic in “primitive cultures”, has influenced my conception of this relationship in post-Enlightenment Europe and the United States. In particular, her arguments regarding the value placed on the unity and purity of the material body when the boundaries of the body politic are threatened, and, conversely, the danger and

power that are often attributed to bodily disorder, help to pinpoint the source of the cancan's fascination and threat in anxiety over physical and social boundary-crossing. In my research, Douglas' focus on "primitive cultures" is exchanged for a focus on a culture within which I am an insider, and Douglas' culturally comparative approach is replaced with the tracing of a single physical practice, the cancan and its spectatorship, across a series of historical moments.

Postmodern anthropology, such as James Clifford's historical contextualisations of the discipline (for example, 1986; 1987; 1988), has also influenced my approach, providing useful models for theorising historical Euro-American conceptions of social and cultural otherness. In particular, social evolutionism and its opposite degenerationism, paradigms of human improvement and decline that influenced nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Euro-American culture, provide the context within which the threats and promises of the cancan dancer's body can be understood. Jane Goodall's (2002) work on evolutionism in nineteenth-century performance, although not the cancan, and Gordon's (2001b; 2003) location of epileptic singing and the cakewalk within this discourse, demonstrated to me that this contextualisation of the dance might uncover some of the politics that animated it. Drawing on the historical work of Robert Young (1995), Daniel Pick (1989), and Peter Stallybrass and Allon White (1986) on social evolution, degeneration, hybridity, and transgression, I construct the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century cancan dancer's body as a site on which the biological and historical destinies of humanity appeared to converge, conjuring a spectre that was simultaneously utopian and dystopian.

In line with the premises of the new research area of visual culture (for example, Crary, 1990; Rony, 1996; Schwartz, 1998; Russell, 1999; Griffiths, 2002), which analyses visual practices across various media and contexts, this thesis argues that the history of the live performing body in the nineteenth century is continuous with the history of the cinematic body from the turn of the twentieth century onwards. Research that operates between various media, and between texts and contexts, is necessarily interdisciplinary. However, the interdisciplinarity of this thesis is also borne of the postmodern impulse to challenge the disciplinary boundaries through which academic hierarchies are maintained. The postmodern critique of modernist power structures is intended to operate at all levels of this research, from subject matter to methodology.

For example, the cancan's shift from live performance into cinema, and the simultaneous rationalisation of its form, is theorised with reference to similar transformations in nineteenth-century romantic literature (Hoffmann, 1885; Villiers, 1982), the contemporary psychoanalytical theories of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) (1945; 1954; 1990), the cultural criticism of Siegfried Kracauer (1889-1966) (1995), Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) (1973a; 1973b) and Theodor Adorno (1903-1969) (1991; Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997), and the work of film studies scholars such as Tom Gunning (1990; 1995a; 2003), whose theory of the cinema of attractions provides a framework for analysing the transfer of nineteenth-century irrational aesthetics into twentieth-century film. The re-emergence of the cancan in films of the 1950s is addressed with reference to the work of film studies scholars on these films, as well as Serge Guilbaut's (1983; 1990) theories of the politics of Cold War art. Finally, the latest revival of the



cancan, in the wake of Moulin Rouge!, is analysed by combining film studies considerations of postmodern cinema and television (Kaplan, 1987; Feuer, 1993; Friedberg, 1993; Williams, 1998; Dickinson, 2001; Mulvey, 2006), and the work of postmodern theorists (Hutcheon, 1988; Jameson, 1991), with theories of the posthuman body (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984, 1988; Haraway, 1991; Hayles, 1999).

This research seeks to contribute specifically to several of the disciplines on which it draws. It seeks to contribute to dance studies an analysis of the cancan as historically and culturally significant, highlighting the need for revision of the dance history canon. To cultural/historical studies it seeks to contribute a model for rereading cultural histories through the nexus between the politics of the material, moving body and the shifting, often contradictory body politics that exist at the level of class, nation, and the fluid transnational identities of postmodernity. And to film studies and research in visual cultures it seeks to contribute a model for reading film and mediation in relation to broader histories of the body and body politics.

The thesis is structured chronologically, with each chapter focusing on a period or historical moment in which the cancan's mediation of contemporary body politics gained particular visibility. However, the web of interconnections between these chapters allow a historically and culturally more complex reading of the cancan's history. Chapter 1 is a review of the literature on the cancan in its live and mediated forms, and a discussion of the methodologies used in the thesis. In chapter 2, the emergence of the live cancan and its development over

the course of the nineteenth century is discussed in terms of its relation to the historical and cultural context created by the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. The notion of a rupture between rationality and irrationality is introduced in this chapter, and the cancan is used to exemplify the ambivalent performance of this distinction through the dancing body.

In chapter 3, attention shifts from the live cancan to its mediated version. The focus of this chapter is the relationship between the cancan and technology, particularly visual technologies, during the nineteenth century, and especially in the 1890s, when the cancan became a popular subject for early cinema. It is argued here that one of the connotations of the nineteenth-century cancan was the threat of the runaway automaton, a figure drawn from romantic literature, and reproduced in early film, but repressed by the innovation of cinematic narrative.

Chapters 4 and 5 focus on two periods in which the cancan emerged as a particularly popular subject for filmmakers: the 1920s and the 1950s. It is argued that in each of these periods, social shifts in the relationship between rationality and irrationality were negotiated and performed on screen in the cancan. In the 1920s this shift was the repression of irrationality by modernisation, accompanied by the persistent threat of its return. And in the 1950s, the emergence of an incipient postmodernism, in the form of an aesthetic of appropriation, was performed by American and French film directors who aligned themselves with the artists and impresarios who first mass produced the cancan in the 1890s.

Chapter 6 addresses the fate of the cancan in the postmodern era, focusing particularly on Baz Luhrmann's film Moulin Rouge! (2001). It is argued that in postmodernity, the cancan spectator is no longer governed by the dictates of humanism, but can become a posthuman cyborg, plugging into rational and irrational images from the past. This mode of spectatorship is on offer in Moulin Rouge!, but the complex politics of the cyborg mean that not everyone chooses to take up this offer.

The thread running through these chapters is the argument that the cancan, from its emergence in the late 1820s to postmodernity, physically mediates and negotiates the shifting relationship between the Enlightenment notions of rationality and irrationality. The thesis aims to demonstrate the complex ways in which the cancan becomes a particularly salient mediator of this tension at various moments in its history. In so doing, it aims to establish the value of the popular cultural body in constructing cultural histories. It will be argued that the cancan constitutes a crucial point of intersection between the body and society in the post-Enlightenment era, from which the cancan body can read through the lens of cultural history, and cultural history can be read through the lens of the cancan body. This potency may be due precisely to the cancan's low cultural status, which allows it to slip under the radar of explicit cultural and historical discourse, and embody more implicit, elusive, but influential patterns of meaning and understanding.

## **Chapter 1: Literature Review and Methodologies**

### **1.1: Introduction**

The Literature Review is divided into four sections. The first deals with primary source material. The second looks at recent, secondary analyses of the subject matter of the thesis, that is, the cancan in both live and mediated forms. The third discusses cultural critics whose theories I have applied to my analysis of the cancan at different stages in its history, but whose work I have also read in its historical context as primary source material for understanding past conceptions of the body. And the fourth section positions this thesis in terms of broader methodological approaches. It will become clear that these divisions are fluid, as the subject matter is not entirely separable from the methodology through which it is examined. The choice of both subject matter and methodology has been influenced by the same postmodern impulse to critique Enlightenment and modernist hierarchies. Furthermore, methodologies are shaped by their historical and cultural context as much as the subject matter, and therefore become part of the subject itself. This problematic categorisation signals a wider difficulty in scientifically separating method from subject in arts research such as this. This chapter therefore represents an attempt to position the thesis in relation to written and visual sources from a variety of disciplines, contexts, and historical periods, with which my research may have multiple, cross-cutting connections.

## **1.2: Primary Source Material**

The most plentiful primary sources on the nineteenth century cancan are spectators' written descriptions. In order to limit the scope of this part of the research, which would otherwise be disproportionate to its relevance to just two chapters of the thesis, I have restricted my reading mainly to those accounts written in English, and those already translated from French into English. These include accounts written in travelogues, memoirs, journals, dance manuals, and early tourist guides. They are almost exclusively written by men (one exception being Grove, 1907) of at least middle-class status, from the perspective of the dance spectator, or the social observer.

Another predominantly male, middle-class nineteenth-century source is the novel. I have drawn mainly on English translations of French literature, with the exception of the work of E.T.A. Hoffman, translated into English from the German. These sources often reveal the broad connotations of the cancan and/or the female body in male bourgeois society. However, like the spectators' accounts, they tend to exclude the perspective of the performer. This imbalance is partially redressed by the memoirs of cancan dancers, although these are few. They are also restricted to those cancan dancers who became famous, such as Rigolboche (Blum, Huart and Rigolboche, 1860) and Celeste Mogador (2001). Rigolboche's memoir was written with the help of two male co-authors, one of whom had already written independently about the cancan phenomenon (Huart, 1844).

Illustrations of the cancan, contained in early spectators' accounts and journals, suggest how the dance was physically embodied, as well as indicating the illustrator's or author's attitude towards the dance. The dance became a popular subject for Impressionist and Post-Impressionist painters in the late nineteenth century (for example Chahut by Georges Seurat [1889-90] [Figure 10], numerous paintings and posters by Toulouse-Lautrec [such as Figure 9], and French Cancan by Pablo Picasso [1901]), and these paintings not only depict the cancan in its social setting, but also point toward the relationship between the cancan and the radical, changing art aesthetics of the time. Photographs of cancan dancers emerge in the second half of the nineteenth century, but these always depict static poses, due to the technological difficulty of capturing movement on photographic film. These images, like the written sources, testify not only to what the cancan was like, and what people thought of it, but to the various attempts made to capture the cancan, to pin down its elusive physicality through art, writing or visual technologies. They are therefore not just sources on the cancan, but direct evidence of practices that emerged at the point of encounter between technology and the irrational moving body.

From chapter 3 onwards, the main focus of the thesis is this relationship between the cancan and visual technologies, particularly film, which becomes the main primary resource. This is not to imply that the cancan no longer existed as a live dance form after the emergence of cinema; it continued to exist in many live forms in France and elsewhere throughout the twentieth century. As with photography, film is not used as a window on the cancan, but as a site on which the debates that surrounded the dance form were directly negotiated, and from

which they can be read in retrospect, when viewed within their historical and cultural context. All discussions of specific films in the thesis derive from my own viewing and analysis of them, unless otherwise stated. These analyses are informed by the contemporary writings of filmmakers, film critics, dance critics and cultural critics. The relatively recent release of the final film analysed here, Moulin Rouge! (2001), allowed personal communication with the choreographer, John O'Connell, in the form of a telephone interview<sup>1</sup>.

### **1.3: Secondary Source Material**

Despite its persistence as a dance form for nearly two hundred years, its popularity (and repudiation) for much of that time, and its influence not just on dance but on aesthetics and body politics in general, the cancan is vastly under-researched in dance studies. Its popularity may indeed be the source of its failure to attract scholarly attention; it has always been defined by its opposition to the high cultural credentials of theatre dance through which the relatively new discipline of dance studies initially staked its claim to scholarly prestige. However, the postmodern rejection of the distinction between high and low culture, from which dance studies itself has benefited, makes the academic consideration of the cancan both possible and relevant (see Hall and Du Gay, 1996, 114). Looking at the cancan not only redresses past imbalances in the scholarly canon, but allows an investigation of the historical and cultural circumstances that brought about those imbalances in the first place. So far this project has mostly been undertaken by scholars from disciplines other than dance studies (for example, history, art history, sociology, musicology, French

literature). Building on this diverse research allows an interdisciplinary approach to the cancan's broad-reaching history. A consideration of literature concerning the visual technologies through which the cancan has been captured extends this interdisciplinarity even further. In this section, the thesis will be situated in relation to the work of various researchers who have approached the cancan and its visual technologies from a range of disciplinary directions.

Historically speaking, my work extends Sarah Cohen's (2000) and Dorinda Outram's (1989) historical analyses of French body politics into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Cohen looks at French aesthetics, particularly those embodied in dance and art, from the beginning of the reign of King Louis XIV (1643) to the late *Ancien Régime* (mid-eighteenth century). She offers a model of the aristocratic and Enlightenment body politics that fuelled the French Revolution. Outram picks up the baton here, analysing the various constructions of the body over which, she argues, the French Revolution was fought. Outram's notions of the rational and irrational body are key terms in my interpretation of the cancan as a dance form which was born out of post-revolutionary politics. The art historian Norman Bryson (1997) has briefly demonstrated one way in which an historical consideration of French body politics can be applied to the cancan, but, drawing heavily on Seurat's painting Chahut, he emphasises the rationalisation of the body in the dance. Another art historian, Howard G. Lay (2001), questions this direct application of Seurat's interpretation of the cancan to the Moulin Rouge cabaret of the 1890s, arguing that the latter was animated by the tension between rationalised mass production and disorderly transgression. My research challenges Outram's contention that the French



Revolution was unequivocally ‘won’ by the forces of bourgeois rationality, demonstrating that while rationalism enjoyed political hegemony until at least the mid-twentieth century, irrationality retained a potency to liberate the individual from the constraints of rational convention, and would provide a position from which the latter could be challenged.

In terms of literature on the cancan itself, this thesis firstly draws on the work of French sociologist François Gasnault (1986) on the public dancing establishments of nineteenth-century Paris. Gasnault’s description of dancing at the *guinguettes* (working class dance halls) of the 1830s is the most comprehensive and well-researched account of the emergence of the cancan from the quadrille. Sarah Davies Cordova (1999), a French literature scholar, draws heavily on Gasnault’s work in her analysis of the cancan at public balls from the turn of the nineteenth century to the 1870s, both in literature and in reality. Cordova assimilates and translates into English a number of sources on a period of the cancan’s history on which little is written. Maribeth Clark (2002) has also drawn on Gasnault’s research from a musicological perspective, reading the transformation of the quadrille into the cancan in terms of themes of mechanisation and primitivism that my research identifies as recurring motifs in the cancan’s history.

A major secondary source on the cancan that does not refer to Gasnault is the book Cancan! (1998) by David Price, a freelance writer. Cancan! prefigures the historical scope of this thesis, tracing the cancan from its emergence in the 1830s, to its heyday in the 1890s, and its transfer to musical film in the twentieth

century. The book is primarily historical, and does not apply any of the postmodern theoretical and methodological frameworks around which this thesis is constructed, although Price does consider feminist perspectives. Its tone is celebratory rather than critical, mostly emphasising the cancan's liberatory rather than enslaving connotations. Price draws on the earlier historical work of Ivor Guest (1947; 1952) on certain aspects of the Second Empire (1852-1870) cancan, which similarly highlights the positive associations of the dance. He also cites historian Charles Rearick (1988) who, like Gasnault, places the cancan in the context of nineteenth-century French entertainment, as well as *fin-de-siècle* republican politics. Price also refers to Jacques Pessis and Jacques Crépineau's (1990) coffee-table book on The Moulin Rouge from 1889 to the present day, which contains numerous contemporary illustrations and photographs of the cancan, as well as press cuttings and programme notes, but without adequate referencing for scholarly purposes.

Within the field of dance studies, Renée Camus (2001a; 2001b) has drawn on Price's work in her own historical research and re-enactment of the cancan. Marta Savigliano (1995) briefly considers the cancan in her analysis of the tango. The postcolonial framework that Savigliano employs shares many features with the methodology used in this thesis, including a critique of the division between self and other. However, whereas Savigliano argues that exoticisation disempowers the Argentinean tango dancer, my research suggests an argument more in line with Homi K. Bhabha (1994b), that the position of other can also offer the possibility of resistance.

In the field of French literature, the work of Rae Beth Gordon (2001b; 2001a; 2003; 2004) and Felicia McCarren (1998; 2003) applies postmodern critical frameworks similar to those used in this thesis (see section 1.5), to the same period of French performance history, but without considering, or only briefly considering, the cancan. In her book Why the French Love Jerry Lewis: From Cabaret to Early Cinema (2001b), Gordon posits the significance of an epileptic aesthetic, a physical mode of performance based on the movements and mechanical/pathological connotations of hysteria, to French cabaret performance of the late nineteenth century and early comic film. Although the cancan was an early embodiment of this aesthetic, and continued to develop it throughout the period with which Gordon is concerned, the dance is only briefly mentioned. However, Gordon's theorisation of the relationship between medical and performative aesthetics, and particularly the notion of unconscious imitation, have informed the interpretation of the cancan in this thesis. McCarren's two books focus on pathological connotations of the dancing body in nineteenth-century France, and the machine as a model for the dancing body in the twentieth century. McCarren's notions of the pathological and mechanical body have been influential in this thesis, but the cancan, which does not appear in either of her books, challenges her temporal division of these body images on either side of the fault line of the turn of the twentieth century. The cancan, like Gordon's epileptic aesthetic, developed a mechanical body as early as the 1830s, and continued to be considered pathological into the 1930s.

From a cross-disciplinary perspective, Jane Goodall (2002) has placed nineteenth-century performance in the context of the evolutionary paradigm, but,

again, without mentioning the cancan. She does, however, consider romantic ballet and the work of the American dancer Loïe Fuller (1862-1928), who rose to fame in Paris in the 1890s, and who is considered in chapter 3 of this thesis. My research similarly employs the social evolutionary framework, demonstrating how the cancan's simultaneous reinforcement and subversion of social evolutionism created moral panic.

In terms of secondary source material on the visual technologies that have captured the cancan, Tom Gunning's (1990; 1995a; 2003) work on early cinema is highly significant. His notion of the cinema of attractions provides a framework for the analysis of irrational aesthetics in film, and the history he traces of its dominance in early film, and its subsequent submergence, provides a context within which the history of the cancan on film can be understood. In addition, his work has facilitated further investigation of irrational aesthetics in film by other scholars. Following Gunning's (2003) own exploration of the relevance of his work to dance studies in his article on Loïe Fuller, Laurent Guido (2006) has applied the notion of the attraction to pre-cinematic and cinematic dance, although with only brief mention of the cancan. Film theorist Linda Williams (1998) and visual culture scholar Martin Jay (Jay, 2000), among others, have theorised the return of the cinema of attractions in postmodernity, historically setting the scene for the emergence of the posthuman spectator posited in chapter 6 of this thesis.

Gunning only briefly mentions the film musical as an example of the re-emergence of the cinema of attractions within narrative film. However, from the

1930s onwards, the film musical becomes an important vehicle for both the cinema of attractions in general and the cancan in particular. While recent research within film studies has addressed specific aspects of the film musical (for example, Cohan, 2002; Knight, 2002), Rick Altman's (1987) and Jane Feuer's (1982; 1993) books remain the key texts on the history of the genre as a whole. Altman's study addresses the film musical from a structuralist viewpoint, and while he does introduce an historical axis to his argument, the structuralist model makes it difficult to account for change in the genre, such as the shift away from the classical structure of the film musical from the 1950s onwards, which is therefore interpreted as disintegration and decline. Feuer is also influenced by structuralism, but additionally draws on Marxist notions of false consciousness and the related theories of the Frankfurt School on the culture industry. This allows her, unlike Altman, to politicise the film musical. However, she does not historicise the Frankfurt School's theories, leading her to reproduce their modernist notions of authenticity (for example, her Marxist interpretation of the film musical as a form of "deception" designed to obscure the 'true' alienation between producer and consumer involved in its production) (Feuer, 1993, 3 and 11), and avoidance of issues of gender, sexuality and race. She recognises these assumptions in the second edition of the book (1993), to which she adds a postscript outlining the emergence of the postmodern musical. Although the teen musicals on which Feuer focuses contrast in certain respects with the postmodern film that I discuss, Moulin Rouge! (2001), released several years after Feuer's publication, she nevertheless provides a framework for investigating the development of the film musical after the post-war collapse of the Hollywood studio system in which the musical had thrived (see section 6.2).

In terms of the relationship between postmodernity and cinema in general, Anne Friedberg's (1993) work has been the most influential on this thesis. Although she analyses postmodern subjectivity in terms of the development of a particular kind of gaze (virtual, mobile), she also points towards changes in the body of the viewer that I develop into the notion of the posthuman spectator. Unlike studies of postmodern cinema that employ either the notion of nostalgia (Jameson, 1991), Walter Benjamin's notion of loss of aura (Russell, 1999), or the Freudian notion of the uncanny (Mulvey, 2006), Friedberg envisions a cinema that operates in a postmodern space in which the modernist hierarchy of rationality is transcended (see section 6.3). However, by positing that cinema has always been postmodern in this way, she ignores the differences between identity construction in the early twentieth century, which operated within the social evolutionary framework, and that in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, when the increasing influence of postmodernism challenged social evolutionary explanations of human difference.

Friedberg does not discuss dance in film, but her notion of the virtual body converges with discourse on film dance at the turn of the twenty-first century. The first extended analysis of the relationship between dance and film was made by Mary Jane Hungerford (1946) in her unpublished PhD thesis, Dancing in Commercial Motion Pictures. Hungerford draws up a classification of film dance forms, which includes expressional dancing, theatrical dancing, ethnic dancing and social dancing. The final category is 'cinedance', a term coined by Hungerford, and defined as the artform that emerges when dance and cinema are

combined. She posits cinedance as the ultimate goal of all film choreography, and claims that at the time of writing this pinnacle had rarely been reached. Cinedance would become the key term for analysis of film dance over the next thirty years, enabling scholars such as Casey Charness (1976) and Jerome Delamater (1978) to conceive of film musical history as a progression towards the rational ideal of integration. However, this model presents the problem, similar to Altman's, that any shift away from integration can only be interpreted as decline.

Larry Billman (1997) eschews the progressionist model in favour of an historically relativist approach, arguing that dance was used for different purposes by different choreographers at different times. For example, he observes that Fred Astaire (1899-1987) and Hermes Pan (1909-1990) pioneered the "dance as seduction" metaphor and the "dance as narrative technique" (1997, 46) in films such as Top Hat (1935) and Swing Time (1936), while the director Mel Brooks (1926-) and choreographer Alan Johnson (1937-) were the first to construct "dance as satire" (1997, 140) in films such as The Producers (1968) and Blazing Saddles (1974). Billman also notes the cross-fertilisation between film dance and other media such as music video, but he does not relate this to broader cultural changes such as the rise of postmodern aesthetics. Sherril Dodds (2001), however, does apply cultural theory to dance on screen. For Dodds, cross-referencing between film, music video and advertising media can be analysed in terms of the postmodern theory of intertextuality. Furthermore, Dodds draws on Donna Haraway's (1991) 'Cyborg Manifesto' to argue that video dance creates low-tech cyborgs or prosthetic techno-bodies, in which video

technology augments the body's materiality. Dodds' prosthetic techno-body bears similarities to Friedberg's virtual body, although the former is a cyborg performer and the latter a cyborg spectator. My posthuman spectator shares with Dodds' techno-body a hybrid status as both material body and machine, allowing participation in the virtual dances constructed in Moulin Rouge!.

#### **1.4: Cultural Criticism**

In this section, the methodology employed in this thesis is positioned in relation to the work of various cultural critics, taking into account not just theoretical and political similarities and differences, but also comparing the historical and cultural context in which the theories are constructed.

In the 1930s, the rise of fascism in Europe and Joseph Stalin's (1878-1953; General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1922-1953) repressions in the Soviet Union provoked a number of European and Soviet intellectuals to formulate critiques of the frameworks of power in Western society. Many drew on Karl Marx's (1818-1883) (1930) critique of capitalism, originally published in 1867, as well as Sigmund Freud's (1945; 1954) notions of repression of the irrational in the rational psyche, and regression to irrationality (see section 4.2). In the midst of modern, Western, mass culture, in which the body, sculpted and honed, was the primary site for the construction of various modernities (for example, the modern woman, as well as the fascist body), several of these theorists recognised the central importance of the body in the history of Western culture.



One of these was Norbert Elias, a German Jewish scholar. Whereas Freud posited the repression of the irrational as a *psychological* mechanism, Elias argued in The Civilising Process (1994), first published in 1939, that since the Renaissance, European bodies have subjected themselves to a *social* repression of any activity that breaks the boundary of the body, such as sweating for example. This taboo was imposed, Elias argues, through prescriptions of manners and etiquette, which advocated the maintenance of a closed body that he calls *homo clausus*. In a radical departure from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century theories of rationality and irrationality, Elias conceives the body as historically and culturally constructed, rather than naturally endowed with, or lacking in, rationality. Elias does not discuss the implications of this civilising process for the distribution of power between bodies of different genders, classes or races. However, Outram (1989) takes up this point in her application of Elias's theory to the French Revolution (see section 2.3). This thesis follows Outram in bringing Elias's work to bear on gender, class, and, unlike Outram, race relations in French history. Possibly due to the politically subversive nature of his work, Elias does not discuss an alternative to the closed construction of the body until the 1968 postscript to his book, where he advocates an "open personality" (Elias, 1994, 481), in which the body is not individual and bounded, but interdependent with other people and bodies. Unlike Elias and Outram, this study concentrates on the relationship between normative and non-normative, rational and irrational bodies, a relationship that was mapped onto performer and spectator in the nineteenth-century cancan, and conceived as a struggle within the spectator in the twentieth century.

In this respect, my research is more closely aligned with that of the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, who wrote Rabelais and His World (1984) in the late 1930s. Like Elias, Bakhtin treats the body as historically and culturally constructed. However, unlike Elias, Bakhtin gives as much attention to the construction of the irrational body (which he calls ‘grotesque’) as the rational one (‘classical’). This is because, as Peter Stallybrass and Allon White point out in their analysis of Bakhtin’s work,

[w]hat is socially peripheral is often symbolically central, and if we ignore or minimize inversion and other forms of cultural negation, we often fail to understand the dynamics of symbolic processes generally.

Stallybrass and White, 1986, 20

In this, Bakhtin’s work parallels that of anthropologists such as Victor Turner, Barbara Babcock and Mary Douglas who look for cultural categories, limits and fears in negations and inversions (Yamaguchi cited in Stallybrass and White, 1986, 17). My research also draws on the similar assertion of postcolonial theory that the self is defined by its other – that which it claims it is not (for example, Bhabha, 1994a). The rational body is constituted by denying its irrational bodiliness.

It is a premise of this thesis that in post-Enlightenment Western society, the exclusion of the body from the realm of rationality, and its designation as trivial, has allowed it to mediate and negotiate ideas that would be dangerous or difficult to discuss in rational discourse, such as writing. Therefore, as Stallybrass and White observe in Bakhtin’s work, “body-images ‘speak’ social relations and

values with particular force” (Stallybrass and White, 1986, 10). Evidence of ‘body-images’, particularly those given social value by their performance as dance movement, and evidence of attitudes to them, such as critiques and moral panics, can be excavated by the researcher as a particularly potent indicator of cultural and historical dynamics.

Elias and Bakhtin reasserted the importance of the body in European history, which had generally been written from a rationalist perspective that denied the body’s role. However, cultural criticism of contemporary society required a slightly different approach, one that acknowledged that the experience of other bodies was now often a mediated one, through photographs and cinema. Walter Benjamin pioneered this approach in his famous essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ (1973b), originally published in 1936. He argues that cinema induces a form of spectatorship that is both critical and tactile, and that this gives film its liberatory potential. Unlike many other twentieth-century cultural critics, Benjamin did not view mass mediated culture in itself as a threat to freedom. It only became dangerous, he contended, when it was manipulated by fascism. This interpretation of mass culture is adopted in this thesis, avoiding a romantic idealisation of the unmediated body as having the aura or authenticity of a singular, irreproducible presence. Theodor Adorno typifies the latter view in his essay ‘On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening’ (Adorno, 1991), first published in 1938 in response to Benjamin’s essay (see section 4.8). By the time of writing his and Max Horkheimer’s short essay ‘The Importance of the Body’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997) in preparation for Dialectic of Enlightenment, originally

published in 1947, Adorno had realised that this was an outdated position: “the romantic attempts to bring about a renaissance of the body in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries simply idealize a dead and maimed condition” (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997, 233). But he continued to criticise mass culture as inherently enslaving in later essays (see Adorno, 1991).

A different critique of the impact of social technologies of power on the body is presented by Michel Foucault (1990; 1991; 2001). He focuses not on the mass culture of the twentieth century, but on the period from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century in which modern mechanisms of social control were constructed. Like Adorno, he argues that the Enlightenment claim to free humanity obscures a darker agenda to rationalise and enslave the body as a “docile” machine, although Foucault addresses the body more directly than Adorno, for whom the unmediated body is often an implicit alternative to the mass mediated world he describes (Foucault, 1991, 222; compare with Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997). For both, this argument is based on the insight that “knowledge... is power” (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997, 4), a relationship that Foucault understands as a complex configuration that he calls “power-knowledge” (Foucault, 1990, 98). My research extends this project of using the body to critique the Enlightenment rhetoric of rationalisation. However, whereas Adorno retains a social evolutionary understanding of irrationality as a primitive state to which, he argues, the Enlightenment ultimately returns us, my research, like Foucault’s (2001), historically contextualises the Enlightenment separation of rationality and irrationality, so that these concepts lose their absolute meaning and become discursive terms whose historical use can be analysed.

For both Adorno and Foucault, unlike Bakhtin, the body is a target of power, rather than a means of resistance. However, whereas Adorno conceives of domination according to the ‘top down’ totalitarian model, for Foucault, power is not possessed but dispersed in an all-encompassing, fluid system. In Foucault’s later work he does include the possibility of resistance in this model: “Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (Foucault, 1990, 95). Resistance, for Foucault, can never operate outside of the historically and culturally specific, power-infused network of philosophical, moral, and scientific frameworks, that he elsewhere calls discourse (for example, Foucault, 1991). Discourse sets epistemological limits to what can be said or understood within a particular historical and cultural context, but Foucault also uses the term discourse to refer to frameworks of meaning that operate on a smaller scale, such as the discourses surrounding the cancan in the nineteenth century. In this sense, “works of art... [are] seen as battlegrounds upon which various discourses, hidden contradictions, and cultural/political interests struggled” (Rubin, 1993, 5). This is the predominant sense in which the notion of discourse is used in this thesis. These small-scale discourses may offer various positions in relation to large-scale discourse, including resistance.

My research, too, locates resistance (such as that represented by the irrational body in the nineteenth century, and the MTV aesthetic in the twenty-first century) within a “strategic network of power relations” (Foucault, 1990, 96). For example, the notion of freedom is employed in this thesis not as freedom

from power, but freedom as defined within a certain power structure, such as the hierarchy of rationality. However, Foucault's historical case studies concentrate almost exclusively on bodies that are repressed by the power structures in which they are entwined. Even in Madness and Civilisation (2001), in which the irrational body is prominent, this body is only ever described as a site of confinement, discipline and surveillance. My focus on both the liberatory and enslaving connotations of the irrational body is more comparable with Bakhtin's work in this respect.

Foucault's notion of repression, though, does not imply the complete subjugation of its object. In volume one of The History of Sexuality (1990) he argues that the "repressive hypothesis" (1990, 10) is misleading in that the repression of sexuality in Europe from the seventeenth century onwards in fact led to "a steady proliferation of discourses concerned with sex" (1990, 18). He is not referring to the grotesque language of the peasantry that Bakhtin analyses, but an increase in talk about sex – its analysis, regulation, and punishment – within what Bakhtin calls "official culture" (Bakhtin, 1984, 394). Here repression causes not the disappearance of the outlawed practices, but their rearticulation as discourse. Furthermore, in Madness and Civilisation (2001) Foucault proposes that the repressed image, driven underground, may remain dormant, and re-emerge at a later point in time:

Even as they separated reason from unreason on society's surface, they preserved in depth the images where they mingled and exchanged properties. The fortresses of confinement functioned as a great, long, silent memory; they maintained in the shadows an iconographic power that men might have thought was exorcised; created by the new classical order, they preserved, against it and

against time, forbidden figures that could thus be transmitted intact from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century.

Foucault, 2001, 198-99

Repression, for Foucault, may channel the irrational into discursive or visual forms in which it survives until it becomes relevant to a new historical moment. This is a key concept in this thesis, employed, for example, in the analysis of the conversion of the 1890s cancan into paintings and film images which re-emerge in musical numbers of the 1930s and 1940s, and the cancan films of the 1950s, a process which parallels the repression of the cinema of attractions, described by Gunning (1990). Walter Benjamin first proposed this concept of history:

The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognised and is never seen again.... For every image of the past that is not recognised by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.

Benjamin, 1973a, 247

Benjamin uses this notion to redefine the Marxist methodology of historical materialism (1973a, 248). For Benjamin, this methodology recognises the changes to our perception of history in the age of mechanical reproduction. As Catherine Russell (2004) points out, Benjamin used photography and cinema as his models of historiography. But, she continues, digital media have initiated another visual revolution that may shift our perception of history again, suggesting and demanding new historiographical frameworks. She observes, for example, that film history has become more accessible, and DVD bonus features offer new, non-diegetic texts for analysis (see also Mulvey, 2006). It might be added that the postmodern spectator's experience of history has become more hypertextual; images or reconstructions of history can be accessed at the touch of

a button or the click of a mouse. This notion of history is integral to my concept of the posthuman spectator (see section 6.4), whose experience of history is virtual in the sense that it is both mediated and embodied simultaneously.

My notion of the posthuman spectator draws on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of the "body without organs" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984, 8), a mode of physicality that Foucault describes in his preface to their book (1984) as appropriate for the post-Marxist, post-Freudian, non-fascist world after 1965. In this context, no longer governed by the hierarchy of rationality on which Marxism, Freudianism and fascism were built, the binary distinctions between closed and open bodies (Elias, 1994), classical and grotesque bodies (Bakhtin, 1984), rationality and irrationality, freedom and enslavement (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997) no longer operate in the same way. Instead they become fluid constructions in the complex web of power that Foucault (1990) envisaged, in which, as Linda Hutcheon notes, the logic of "both/and" replaces the binary rhetoric of "either /or" (Hutcheon, 1988, 49).

### **1.5: Methodologies**

In this section, this thesis is situated in relation to broader methodological approaches recognised within the humanities. The primary framework within which this research sits is postmodern theory. Although the term postmodernism embraces a range of approaches, these are generally linked by a particular perspective on modernism. If modernism can be characterised as a system based on a series of absolute hierarchies (of purity or rationality, for example) that



allow cultural glorification of those at the top of the hierarchy and exclusion or repression of those at the bottom (see Jervis, 1999), then postmodernism is a perspective from which these apparently universal values can be seen to be based not on rational judgement but on a system of power (Huyssen, 1986; Hutcheon, 1988, 26). This realisation allows a rehabilitation of the excluded or repressed elements and therefore a revision of various canons of knowledge and linear historical narratives. For example, in this thesis the Enlightenment hierarchy of rationality is viewed as a social construction that justifies a particular distribution of power. The irrational is no longer a naturally inferior state, but a category created for purposes of repression, which can nevertheless become a position of resistance. When applied to dance practices, this recuperation of the irrational allows the questioning of a dance history canon in which the cancan, the embodiment of irrationality in the nineteenth century, is excluded in favour of high cultural dance forms such as ballet. My research repositions the cancan as an important mediator of rational and irrational body politics in Europe, and later the United States, from the late 1820s to the present day.

The postmodern perspective does not involve a complete refutation of modernism, however. As a number of theorists (such as Huyssen, 1986; Hutcheon, 1988; Jencks, 1996) have pointed out, postmodernism demands a complex process of appropriating modernist strategies while simultaneously critiquing them. For example, my methodology arises out of the cultural criticism discussed in the last section, much of which draws on modernist dichotomies such as freedom/enslavement, and these categories are appropriated in order to understand contemporary notions of the body. But the exclusion of notions of

gender and racial difference from these theories, for instance, is redressed here not only by reinserting these factors into the analysis, but by addressing the question of why these notions were repressed in the first place.

In reading gender and race back into the theories of Western modernity and postmodernity proposed by the cultural critics, my research sometimes draws on feminist, post-feminist and postcolonial theory. In particular, the opposition between self and other, for example in the practice of colonial stereotyping outlined by Bhabha (1994a), provides a useful model for the processes of exclusion involved in rational identity construction. These critical positions also offer ways of theorising the breakdown of the self/other dichotomy, such as Bhabha's (1994a) and Young's (1995) divergent interpretations of hybridity, and Haraway's (1991) post-feminist figure of the cyborg. The history of the cancan exemplifies Bhabha's argument, echoed by Bruno Latour (2000), that acts of separation/exclusion/purification and acts of hybridisation are inextricable in modernity.

In a broader sense, this thesis can also be seen as a continuation of the project started by Elias (1994), Bakhtin (1984) and Foucault (for example, 1990; 1991; 2001), discussed in the last section, to put the body itself back into historical enquiry. Following Dorinda Outram's application of the work of these scholars to the French Revolution, this thesis similarly aims "[t]o demonstrate that 'histories of the body' and 'big history' can be integrated" (Outram, 1989, 6). This involves a Foucauldian interpenetration of macro history (on the level of broad cultural/historical shifts between paradigms, or "episteme[s]") (Foucault,

2002, 60) such as that from modernity to postmodernity) and micro history (on the level of particular bodies). This thesis attempts to move between these two levels of explanation, revealing the complex connections between them.

One way of traversing the gap between macro and micro history is through a focus on performance. As an event that is at least to a certain extent culturally and historically constructed, but is also played out through particular bodies, performance can allow interconnections between macro and micro levels to become visible. This applies as much to the live cancan performances analysed in chapter 2, as to the mediated performances in the cancan films explored in chapters 3 to 6.

The remainder of this chapter focuses on two areas of recent interdisciplinary debate where performance in general, and dance in particular, has or could emerge as a fertile point of articulation between analysis of the body and analysis of historical and cultural formations. The first is the interface between the older disciplines of history and anthropology, where the hybrid methodologies of historical anthropology and new historicism have developed, and the second is the interface between the newer disciplines of dance history and cultural studies, where hybrid methodologies are still at an embryonic stage. My research draws on work at both of these interfaces.

Several anthropologists have approached performance as a form of cultural expression grounded in the body (for example, Turner, 1986; Schechner, 2003). Victor Turner argues that the “postmodern turn” in anthropology has allowed the

potentially messy physicality of performance to become an acceptable object of anthropological enquiry:

Postmodern theory would see in the very flaws, hesitations, personal factors, incomplete, elliptical, context-dependent, situational components of performance, clues to the very nature of human process itself, and would also perceive genuine novelty, creativeness, as able to emerge from the freedom of the performance situation.... What was once considered "contaminated," "promiscuous," "impure" is becoming the focus of postmodern analytical attention.

Turner, 1986, 77

Through this anthropological lens, performance can be interpreted as a culturally constructed phenomenon that is, nevertheless, more than just a reflection of its cultural context. Rather, performance provides a frame within which cultural norms can be inverted, subverted, parodied, or played with (see Lancaster, 1997).

Since anthropology began to assert itself as a distinct discipline in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it defined itself by the study of contemporary social life, in opposition to the historical axis around which this thesis is orientated (Gaunt, 1982; Burke, 1992). However, the disintegration of disciplinary boundaries in postmodernity has led some anthropologists to question this distinction, and integrate anthropological and historical methodologies in various ways (for example, Sahlins, 1981; Gaunt, 1982; Bloch, 1986; Clifford, 1988; Comaroff and Comaroff, 1992; Dresch and James, 2000; Axel, 2002). For example, John and Jean Comaroff delineate what they call a “‘neomodern’ historical anthropology” (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1992, 7) whose possible subject matter is expanded from the traditional fieldsite, to include international forces and formations, including the mass media of Europe and the

United States, in both the past and present. Their anthropological approach to history focuses less on ‘events’ and more on complex, contradictory and ambiguous everyday activity, recognising that large-scale systems are always grounded in small-scale practices, and that the former can be illuminated by looking at the latter. They cite the connection between the ‘body politic’ and the ‘body personal’ as an example. The body, they argue, is a particularly potent site of implicit meanings and ambiguous practices, and thus particularly suitable for this type of historical anthropological investigation.

The Comaroffs’ historical anthropology has been applied to performance by Angela J. Latham (2000) in her book on American female performers of the 1920s, creating a distinctive methodology that she calls “historical performance ethnography” (2000, 13). Whereas functionalist anthropology advocated an ethnographic approach in which the anthropologist immersed him/herself in another culture, Latham immerses herself in “the sensory experiences represented in the archives of history” (Latham, 2000, 14). My research employs this hybrid methodology when looking at particular historical moments when the cancan becomes salient as a performance of cultural dynamics, such as the 1890s, 1920s and 1950s.

However, unlike Latham, this thesis is concerned not just with slices of time, but with how performance operates across and between time periods. Here I draw not only on Benjamin’s definition of history as “the constellation which [our] own era has formed with a definite earlier one” (Benjamin, 1973a, 255), discussed in the last section, but on the postmodern historiography (such as that

of Foucault) and new historicism that have emerged since scholars such as Benjamin began to question linear, causal, chronological accounts of history in the 1920s and 1930s. New historicism approaches the breakdown of disciplinary boundaries between history and anthropology, from the opposite, historical side of the divide. Drawing on the work of anthropologists such as Turner and Clifford Geertz (Veaser, 1989, xi), new historicism incorporates into history the anthropological insight that human behaviour is culturally constructed rather than the natural result of a universal human nature. History therefore constitutes not a linear unfolding of chronology (Veaser, 1989, xv), but a complex, unpredictable process of reconstructing and deconstructing meanings in relation to past, present and future experiences. While the chapters of this thesis are arranged in chronological order, the cancan draws a complicated web of interconnections across these disjointed historical instants, as well as between the live and/or mediated performances within each chapter.

New historicism also draws from anthropology a concern to foreground the role of the researcher/writer in constructing the historical/cultural networks they weave (Veaser, 1989, ix). My historical critique of the rational, objective, humanist body in this thesis demands that I also interrogate my own claim to knowledge and authority. As a dancer and researcher, I am acutely aware of the subtle disembodiments and re-embodiments that occur continually in shifting between the roles of performer, student, teacher and scholar. No doubt this constant personal repositioning feeds into my interest in, and analysis of, the historical relations between the bodies of performers and spectators. My involvement in salsa in London, for example, encourages my empathy with the

irrational project of breaking down rational, humanist bodily boundaries. But as an academic, I cannot extricate my research from the very rationalist impulse that I critique here, to capture the cancan and view it through a lens.

In some respects, however, anthropological methodologies are less obviously amenable to dance history than the methods of cultural studies. Whereas ethnography has, for much of its twentieth-century existence, been defined by the presence of the ethnographer, making the study of the past theoretically problematic, cultural studies, which “remains largely text-based or object-based” (Desmond, 1997, 30), does not encounter methodological difficulties when addressing historical cultural forms. Several dance scholars have recently encouraged the analysis of dance from a cultural studies viewpoint, by both dance and cultural studies researchers. For example, Jane C. Desmond (1997) argues that cultural studies could benefit from looking at dance by redressing its, “bias for verbal texts and visual-object-based investigations”, encouraging greater attention to “kinaesthetic actions” (1997, 30). Conversely, she proposes that dance studies could benefit from cultural studies by facilitating research on “dance as a performance of cultural identity” (1997, 31). This thesis aims to combine these advantages of a cultural studies approach to dance, analysing the cancan as a performance in which the connections between the nuances of bodily movement, and broader issues of cultural identity, are made visible.

Helen Thomas (2003) has argued that while the body was at best an undercurrent in cultural and sociological approaches to dance until the 1970s, the increasing influence of feminist, poststructuralist and postmodernist theories in the late

twentieth century led to an explosion of interest in the body as a subject of research in the social sciences, a development she calls the “body project” (Thomas, 2003, 11) (see also Williams and Bendelow, 1998, 9-24). In particular, the influence of theorists such as Thomas Laqueur and Michel Foucault, she observes, has led to the questioning of feminist assumptions about the essential biological differences between bodies, and encouraged acknowledgement that bodies are historically as well as culturally constructed. Although Bryson’s wish that, “it could not be long before dance – the most blatant and unarguable instance of the disciplined body – would appear high on scholarship’s Foucauldian agenda” (Bryson, 1997, 56) has not yet been fulfilled, this thesis seeks to bring the new histories of the body to bear on dance history, while using the historical cancan material to question aspects of Foucault’s approach.

Both Amy Koritz (1996) and Bryson (1997) have indicated the institutional politics involved in bringing dance history within the purview of cultural studies. Koritz outlines the issues of “integration” or “autonomy” for the discipline of dance history raised by the treatment of dance as “an important location for the symbolic enactment of larger ideological issues facing a society” (Koritz, 1996, 89 and 92). She notes that the impulse towards the autonomy of dance studies from other disciplines such as cultural studies can be attributed at least partly to the “persistent marginality” of dance studies, which “contributes to a desire for an autonomous place in which dance scholarship... is the central concern” (Koritz, 1996, 89). However, keeping the concerns of dance insulated from the interests and developments of other disciplines may only reinforce this marginality.



Here, the politics of the subject matter of this thesis, the cancan, coincide with the politics of its methodology. The politics of rational separation and irrational hybridity animate both the history of the cancan and the dynamics of modernist disciplinary distinction and postmodern interdisciplinarity. If, from a postmodern perspective, the impulse towards the rationalisation of the cancan body can be recognised as fear of irrational boundary-crossing, as this thesis argues, then perhaps the same critique can be applied to disciplinary autonomy. The scholar who maintains the purity of her/his discipline by avoiding contamination by other disciplines, particularly those involved in the material body, can perhaps be compared to the nineteenth-century cancan spectator, keeping his/her distance from the spectacle. But while power still gravitates to modernist hierarchies of purity in postmodernity, this distribution of power is increasingly subject to deconstruction. As the cancan spectator becomes more and more posthuman (a type of body in which rationality and irrationality interpenetrate - see section 6.4), a nuanced interdisciplinarity may develop, in which disciplinary boundaries are neither fortified nor annihilated, but fluid. Bryson hopes that this kind of methodology can emerge in the wake of Foucault, who made it “possible to think of the body itself as a key component in cultural history” (Bryson, 1997, 55). He exemplifies this possibility firstly with reference to the body politics of the court of Louis XIV, and secondly with reference to dance culture in nineteenth-century Paris, including the cancan, research areas which, he claims, “have some of the greatest interest and potential for further development, as these appear at the intersection between dance history and cultural studies” (1997, 75). My research aims to develop an approach in which the postmodern critique and re-articulation

of the rational/irrational binary is present in both subject matter (the cancan) and methodology simultaneously.

## **1.6: Conclusion**

The choice of subject matter and methodology for this thesis developed out of the same postmodern concern to critique the Enlightenment hierarchy of rationality. The cancan, as the embodiment of irrationality in the nineteenth century, has generally been excluded from the dance history canon. My research aims to recuperate it, firstly by investigating primary evidence of nineteenth- and twentieth-century attempts to grapple with the anxiety the dance raised, through writing, drawing, painting, photography and film. Secondary studies of these sources, mostly from disciplines other than dance studies, are examined in order to build an interdisciplinary approach to the cancan and its technological capture. My reading of these primary and secondary sources is influenced by the efforts of twentieth-century cultural critics to bring the body back into historical and contemporary analyses of Western culture, as a politicised body variously conceived as grotesque, repressed, docile or posthuman. The blind-spots of these approaches, such as gender and race, are redressed by drawing on feminist and post-colonial theory. Finally, performance, particularly dance performance, is placed centrally in my analysis, as a way of articulating cultural and historical concerns through the body. This methodology on one hand unpicks the webs of power in which the cancan has been embroiled since its emergence out of Enlightenment politics, but on the other, constitutes another lens through which the cancan's troubling irrationality can be captured.

## **Chapter 2: Revolting Bodies: The Nineteenth-Century Cancan as a Performance of Irrationality and Liberalism**

### **2.1: Introduction**

The focus of this chapter is the emergence and development of the cancan as a live social and performative dance form in nineteenth-century France. The chapter can broadly be divided into two halves. The first half (sections 2.2-2.5) addresses the philosophical, political, corporeal, artistic and social discourses that created the context within which the cancan would operate. These factors have been traced back to the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, although the cancan also responded to ideas with much longer histories, and to circumstances more proximal to its appearance in the late 1820s. The discourses described here, however, are those with which the cancan is involved throughout its history, both in the nineteenth century and the twentieth. In this sense, the first half of this chapter sets out the cultural debates which define the cancan, and which therefore form the backbone of this thesis.

The second half of the chapter (sections 2.6-2.12) is concerned with the cancan itself, and in particular, the ways in which the cancan's mediation of the debates detailed in the first half played out during the course of the nineteenth century. The argument advanced here is that the cancan embodied the irrational side of the Enlightenment split between the rational and the irrational. In doing so, the dance offered a spectre of an alternative society based on liberation from the march of rationalisation. This image was both enticing and disturbing for the

nineteenth-century bourgeoisie, prompting tactics of defence, and voyeuristic surveillance.

## **2.2: The Enlightenment: The Seeds of a Schism**

In this section, the philosophical writings of Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), John Locke (1632-1704) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) are used as points of reference to explain the emergence of a tension in Enlightenment thought between a progressive model of society in which humanity moved inexorably towards a higher state of perfection and rationality, and the critique of this model, utilising ideas of the primitive and the irrational. In the nineteenth century the cancan would emerge from this contradiction as a performance which played out the physical implications of the split between the rational and irrational.

Enlightenment philosophy responded to, and later underpinned, the questioning of the monarchical organisation of European states in the eighteenth century (see Outram, 1995, chapter 9), as well as the challenge to religious belief posed by scientific exploration. From around the time of the English Revolution of 1688, which resulted in the restraint of the power of the monarch by parliamentary democracy, political philosophers began to develop models for social relations that were less rigidly hierarchical. They conceived of human beings as subject not to divine power, embodied in the monarch, but to natural laws. This notion was the product of a universalising impulse to encompass all of humanity within a single explanatory scheme, including those societies newly discovered through exploration and colonisation. However, while this model had a democratising

effect in its supposition that all human beings were equal products of nature, it also introduced a new scale of differentiation: the ‘natural’ differences produced by change through historical time.

The first philosophical manifestations of this model, in the work of Hobbes and Locke, defined civilisation not by its proximity to the divine, or by the aristocratic trappings that displayed this endowed grace, but by its contrast with a theoretical ‘state of nature’, which reasonable human beings could choose to leave behind in favour of a social contract (Haworth, 2004). After François-Marie Arouet de Voltaire (1694-1778) introduced Locke’s ideas to France, philosophers such as Rousseau and Étienne Bonnot de Condillac (1715-1780) transformed this state of nature into the ‘primitive’, a category defined not just by its cultural difference from civilisation, but by its location in the historical past (Cohen, 2000; Haworth, 2004).

These philosophers founded a particularly French form of Enlightenment rhetoric in which cultural, political, and physical differences were explained with reference to an historical progression from the ‘primitive’ to the ‘civilised’. The predominant view, held, for example, by the Marquis de Condorcet (1743-1794) and Jacques Turgot (1727-1781) was that this progression represented improvement, leading to the increasing perfection of humanity (Outram, 1995). This was related to the increasing domination of rationality. For Hobbes, “the life of man [was] solitary, poore [sic], nasty, brutish, and short” (cited in Haworth, 2004, 83) until reason allowed him to escape from the state of nature by establishing a social contract. For Locke, although differing from Hobbes in his

attribution of reason even to the state of nature, it is reason that alerts human beings to the benefits of the social contract. For both philosophers, reason allows us to surrender certain liberties (such as the freedom to infringe the liberties of others) to an authority, in return for the freedom to live safely and securely (Haworth, 2004).

Rousseau, however, initiated a line of thought which inverted this historical logic. While for Locke and Hobbes, civilisation had allowed reason and freedom to reign, for Rousseau, “[m]an was born free, and he is everywhere in chains” (cited in Haworth, 2004, 139). In the Discourse on Inequality (1755) Rousseau set out his thesis that the shift to an agricultural way of life had led to a social system based on private property, from which it was inevitable that economic and social inequalities would develop, leading to the despotism that he claimed was institutionalised in the French monarchy (Haworth, 2004). Although Rousseau believed that it was impossible to return to the freedom of the ‘savage’, his reversal of the progressive model of civilisation, and his glorification of the primitive, revealed the inherent tensions in the Enlightenment worldview.

The historical, progressive model of humanity can be interpreted as a problematic fusion of the hierarchical system that had supported the European monarchies, and new, more democratic ideas. Its unification of humanity under the single umbrella of ‘nature’, conflicted with its sanctioning of civilisation (and, by extension, colonialism) as the pinnacle of ‘natural’ progression. The model contained within itself, therefore, both the potential for reinforcing hierarchy, and for overthrowing it. The crucial question was the relationship

between reason and freedom. If civilisation was characterised by increasing rationality, did this correspond to increasing freedom? Or, on the contrary, was humanity enslaved by the rationalisation of society, and in need of irrationality for its liberation? Furthermore, was it indeed the case that rationality increased with civilisation, or was society in fact becoming more irrational? The answers to these questions would determine what sort of society should replace the monarchical, religious world that was rapidly receding.

Hobbes' and Locke's theories were radical in that they replaced the authority of God with the authority of reason. However, their arguments also served to buttress the superiority of European civilisation. By contrast, Rousseau, and those who followed him, used the notion of the primitive to challenge Europe's ascendancy, and to suggest alternative ways of organising society<sup>1</sup>. The force of this challenge was well-expressed by Voltaire, who swore to resist, "as a sober, critical, realistically-minded citizen and scholar, the abyss of irrationalism which Rousseau had torn open and which threatened to swallow up the whole structure of the enlightenment" (cited in Hauser, 1951, 72). The Enlightenment, with its universalising historical timeline from the 'primitive' to the 'civilised', contained the seeds for both of these divergent rhetorics. As Arnold Hauser (1951, 69) points out, the power of Rousseau's argument derived as least in part from his ability to articulate tensions that were already present in Enlightenment thought. Rousseau's writings served as the first inscriptions of a space that was already opening up between rationalism, progressivism, and Eurocentrism on one hand, and primitivism as a critique of European culture on the other. Within this space, ideas of freedom and enslavement, rationality and irrationality, and hierarchy and

democracy, could be manipulated in numerous ways to construct arguments about past, present and future European society.

### **2.3: Rational and Irrational Bodies**

In this section, Dorinda Outram's historical account of constructions of the body prior to and during the French Revolution, will be positioned in relation to the more generalised, theoretical histories of the European body posited by Norbert Elias (1994), Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) and Michel Foucault (1991), to argue that the Enlightenment split between rationality and irrationality was carved out not just in philosophic rhetoric, but also on the body.

The body was inextricable from the Enlightenment arguments about human nature and society, particularly in France, where the presentation of the body had been central to the maintenance of monarchical power since Louis XIV (1638-1715) (Cohen, 2000)<sup>2</sup>. Sarah Cohen (2000) argues that under Louis XIV power resided in the art of constructing the body as a spectacle which displayed its natural, God-given grace. The king's body, in particular, corporealised both the monarchical power structure and the king's place in it. This body was distinctly hierarchical, both in terms of its central positioning in actual space (both in court and in the court ballets that Louis XIV developed) (Cohen, 2000, 89), and in terms of its placement at the 'head' of the imaginary body politic, whose trunk comprised the aristocracy, and whose extremities symbolised the peasantry (Outram, 1989, 66). This structure drew on classical models of the body as an integrated, hierarchical and closed system. As Cohen shows, the power of the



king's body was increasingly appropriated by the aristocracy in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, but the nobility reproduced the royal construction of a body whose artifice signalled its superiority. The Enlightenment would allow aristocratic authority to be undermined by rejecting the artful display of the body through which hierarchy had been maintained.

This development has been characterised by Cohen as a shift away from the artful body as a means for the privileged to monopolise power, towards a conception of the body as 'naturally' revealing its own 'truth', in line with the natural laws of humanity posited by the philosophers. As the aristocracy increasingly struggled to maintain their cultural hegemony, their bodily style was gradually rejected as artificial, disguising corruption. The middle classes recognised that the equality of the natural body powerfully countered the exclusivity of the aristocratic model, but it also introduced a new corporeal hierarchy: the more rational the body, the more it was in line with the laws of nature, and the more qualified it was to dictate its values to the rest of society. Therefore, by cultivating a rational body, members of the middle class could display physical evidence of their suitability to the task of appropriating power from the corrupt aristocracy. As Outram (1989) has shown, this rational body was constructed with reference to the bodies of classical antiquity. While the monarchical system had drawn on the classical body for its representation of a hierarchical body politic, the rising middle classes drew particularly on the Stoic conception of the body as a vessel of pure rationality, detached from the passions and emotions. This body did not display itself, or invite the gaze as the aristocratic body had done, but hid its own physicality, fearful that the body

might expose the limits of its reason. The actual, material body became purely a function of the abstract rationality for which it was a vehicle.

This separation of the body from rationality drew on a long history in Western philosophy. Socrates (470-399 BC) rejected the body as a pollutant of pure knowledge. Plato (428/427-348/347 BC) attributed the following to Socrates (who left no direct writings) in The Last Days of Socrates (2003):

So long as we keep to the body and our soul is contaminated with this imperfection, there is no chance of our ever attaining satisfactorily to our object, which we assert to be Truth. In the first place, the body provides us with innumerable distractions in the pursuit of its necessary sustenance, and any diseases which attack us hinder our quest for reality. Besides, the body fills us with loves and desires and fears and all sorts of fancies and a great deal of nonsense, with the result that we literally never get an opportunity to think at all about anything.... We are in fact convinced that if we are ever to have pure knowledge of anything, we must get rid of the body and contemplate things in isolation with the soul in isolation.... It seems that so long as we are alive, we shall continue closest to knowledge if we avoid as much as we can all contact and association with the body... and instead of allowing ourselves to become infected with its nature, purify ourselves from it until God himself gives us deliverance.

Plato, 2003, 127-28

Socrates rejection of the body was developed into a moral framework in Stoic philosophy, founded in the early third century BC, and it later re-emerged as a founding principle of Western science. Elias (1994), who originally published his detailed analysis of the effects of the civilising process on the European body in 1939, has argued that scientific thought was predicated on the self-detachment and distancing of the scientist from his/her own spontaneous physical and emotional impulses. This, he contends, was necessary for the shift away from the

earth as the centre of the universe, posited by Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543). Elias contends that science naturalised this objectification of the world by construing the “act of distancing” as “distance actually present” (1994, 478), making its underlying assumption into a scientific fact. The link between the denial of the body and rationality was developed in more stringent form in the work of early seventeenth-century philosophers such as René Descartes (1596-1650), for whom truth could not be reliably ascertained through the physical senses but only through logical deductive thought. Elias shows how this scientific and philosophical corporeal rationalism spread through society from the Renaissance onwards, particularly through the prescription of civilised behaviour and good manners. His examples show how the denial of the materiality of the individual body was accompanied by an avoidance of physical interaction between bodies, creating what he calls ‘*homo clausus*’, or ‘closed man’.

For Elias, this denial of the body and bodily interaction is both liberating, in that it reduces the everyday threat of physical violence by fostering respect for the integrity of individual bodies, for example, and enslaving, in that it restricts the behaviour of the individual. In this respect, Elias’ argument is similar to those of the social contract theorists. However, Elias also notes that the successful civilisation of society is based on instilling in every individual “a wall of deep-rooted fears” (1994, 368). He appears to be referring to fears of breaking the rules of civilised behaviour. But the successful construction of a rational body that maintains its defences in all situations requires not just a fear of breaking the rules of that body, but a more direct, visceral fear of bodies that are irrational,

and therefore pose the threat of contamination. This corresponds with Homi K. Bhabha's (1994a) model of the colonial stereotype, in which the repeated assertion of a unitary, pure identity, reveals the anxiety of the colonial self, and a fear of impure identity that is typically projected onto a repressed, stereotyped other. Elias' model does not include the other against which the rational body is defined. This can be found, however, in the work of Bakhtin (1984).

Bakhtin argues that since the Renaissance, writers and artists have drawn on two contrasting aesthetic traditions of representing the body: the classic and the grotesque. The classical body is characterised by boundedness, separation from other bodies, and a completeness that denies the continual changes the body undergoes throughout life and death. This is the body promoted by high, official culture, and it corresponds with the rational, closed body described by Elias. By contrast, the grotesque body is unbounded and open to other bodies and the world, particularly via its orifices, which become a focal point. It is also incomplete, engaged in processes of reproduction, birth and death. Representations of the grotesque body characterise the carnivalesque folk culture that evaded and challenged officialdom in the medieval period and the Renaissance.

According to Bakhtin, the grotesque had its origins in imagery of the preclassical period of antiquity. During the classical period this imagery was defined as 'low' culture and repressed in the official realm. However, it continued to develop outside the boundaries of official culture, and regained influence in the art and literature of late antiquity. Thus, the classical is historically defined by its

rejection of the grotesque, and the grotesque by its opposition to, and evasion of, the classical. Bakhtin argues that this mutually defining dynamic remained central to the relationship between the classical and the grotesque when they re-emerged as key elements of Renaissance art and literature. During the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, he continues, the classical model dominated art and literature, necessitating the suppression of the grotesque. This coincided with the embodiment of the classical firstly by the French monarchy, and then increasingly by the aristocracy, who underwent the civilisation of the body described by Elias. However, while Elias's civilising process continues unabated from the Renaissance until the twentieth century, Bakhtin posits a re-emergence and transformation of the grotesque in the second half of the eighteenth century, precisely the period in which the classical or civilised body of the aristocracy is transformed into the rational body of the middle class.

Whereas folk grotesque had constituted its own culture, separate from the elite world, in the late eighteenth century, Bakhtin argues, the classical and the grotesque became opposing themes within one culture: middle-class, individualist romanticism. The romantic movement emerged in the pre-revolutionary period in response to Rousseau's critique of civilisation and glorification of the natural and the primitive (Hauser, 1951). Like Rousseau, romantic artists saw in the irrational the possibility of liberation from the restrictive conventions of rational, classical European culture, incorporating elements from the emerging discourse of the irrational into their literature, poetry and art. However, the romantics also remained middle or upper class and therefore vulnerable to the pressures of the civilising process and rationalisation.

Romanticism thus represented the incorporation of the grotesque into the elite European worldview as an alternative to and/or critique of European rationalist culture.

Bakhtin argues that this transformation of the grotesque modified its meaning. Whereas folk grotesque had been an overwhelmingly life-affirming, liberating and positive culture, “[t]he world of Romantic grotesque is to a certain extent a terrifying world, alien to man” (Bakhtin, 1984, 38). The irrational is at once a freeing and dangerous prospect for the elite European, offering both release from convention and the possibility of contamination, irrationality and rejection. Bakhtin reads this as a perversion and diminishment of the positive, truly oppositional culture of the folk grotesque. However, while the folk grotesque represented a more complete inversion of official culture, it also existed within a strictly hierarchical system in which its opposition could not threaten the elite. In the romantic version, the grotesque infiltrated the culture of the increasingly dominant middle class, and its negative connotation reflected the true threat it now posed.

The simultaneous fascination and fear that the irrational now inspired demanded a response from the rational body. On one hand it needed fortification against the threat of contamination. On the other, it needed to preserve a gateway to the irrational, as the possibility of escape, or at least temporary release, from rationalisation. The solution was the elevation of sight as the most rational of the senses. The eyes allowed the observation of the irrational from a safe distance, avoiding the dangers of contamination or temptation that might result from direct

interaction between bodies. Vision was already emerging as a privileged sense in philosophical circles. The development of empiricism, by Hobbes and Locke for example, had validated certain forms of sense experience as a basis for knowledge, particularly observation (see Law, 1993, 20). The restriction of bodily contact to observation became, like the rational body, a signifier of respectability, and a fundamental part of the education of the civilised individual. In a prescription cited by Elias from the 1774 edition of *Les règles de la bien-séance et de la civilité chrétienne*, a manual of civilised behaviour written by St. John Baptist de La Salle, the privileging of sight as the only civilised sense, is made clear: “Children like to touch clothes and other things that please them with their hands. This urge must be corrected, and they must be taught to touch all they see only with their eyes” (La Salle cited in Elias, 1994, 170).

According to Foucault (1991), observation provided not only a window onto the irrational, but a means for its control. Whereas the aristocracy’s power had been based on their ability to attract the gaze of others, the pre-revolutionary middle class asserted their claim as successors to the aristocracy not only by constructing their own bodies as rational rather than physical, but by using this rationality to justify their right to observe other bodies (Outram, 1989). Their rhetoric was the replacement of aristocratic artifice and corruption with a visual politics validated by the authority of scientific objectivity. It was this authority, invulnerable to accusations of self-interest or bias, that made vision, according to Foucault’s famous formulation, a source not just of knowledge, but of subtle and devastating power. Furthermore, this disciplinary gaze is all-encompassing and inescapable. The panopticon, an architectural model for surveillance that

Foucault (1991) adopts from Jeremy Bentham, allows the observer to see all, and control all, without being seen.

Drawing on Foucault, Outram (1989) argues that the application of the scientific, rational gaze to the body in the pre-revolutionary era allowed medical authorities to control not just the middle-class body, but the unruly peasant body as well.

Recommendations for the care and use of the body drew on the idea that the rational body was constituted by its separation from other bodies, as well as new theories about the sources of disease. They advised a hygienic approach in which particular external substances, such as dirt, were kept out of the body, and conversely internal secretions, such as sweat, were kept within. The result was a body protected from other bodies, and from the threats to health present in the world at large, by the barrier of the skin. It was individuated both in its internal unity and its isolation from external influences. Initially, this body image was found only in medical literature intended for middle-class consumption.

However, Outram argues, as the middle class gradually replaced the aristocracy as the source of culturally dominant values, the weight of scientific authority was used to impose this construction of the body on groups, such as peasants, whose cultural differences from the middle class made them difficult to control.

However, Foucault's model, outlined in Discipline and Punish (1991) of disciplinary surveillance as an unstoppable force that is an end in itself, ignores the extent to which the will to control is motivated by the fear of loss of control. The construction of the rational body is accompanied by the construction of the irrational body as a repository for all that the rational body denies, an object of



both disgust and repressed desire<sup>3</sup>. Outram compares middle-class medical recommendations for the care and use of the body with middle-class descriptions of the peasant body as irrational, dirty, uncontrollable, fragmented and incomplete. These are exactly the characteristics of Bakhtin's grotesque body, contrasting sharply with the middle-class, rational body. Outram reads this as evidence of the existence of an alternative model of physicality to that of the rational body. What she does not point out, however, is that the threat that this model poses is not the threat of the actual peasant body, but rather the threat of all the materiality and irrationality that the middle class have denied in constructing their own body image, *projected onto* the peasant body. The irrational body, which rationalisation seeks to repress, is in fact the incarnation of the rational body's nemesis, its other, in the form of the social group that most threatens rational hegemony. The irrational body, or the romantic grotesque, is so menacing to the middle-class because it is a ghost of themselves, a monster of their own making. The threat that this inverse image posed to the middle-class is indicated by its perceived capacity to contaminate the rational body with its "disease, dirt and hunger" (Outram, 1989, 57), necessitating its rationalisation and control. However, the real threat was that the rational body would be exposed as merely a construction of the middle class to justify their claim to political, cultural and social superiority.

Just as Enlightenment philosophy produced conflicting accounts of a progression towards rational freedom and a descent into irrational enslavement, so the body underwent a schism in eighteenth-century France, between the official middle-class body, founded on reason and closure, and the fear of an underlying

irrationality in the body, associated with the lower classes, which must be controlled and repressed. Outram argues that these two body images were brought head to head in the French Revolution (1789-1799).

On one hand, the Revolution involved cooperation between the lower classes and the middle classes against the aristocracy. On the other hand, however, it was important for the middle classes that they build the post-revolutionary body politic in their own mould. Therefore, Outram argues, male, middle-class revolutionaries drew heavily on classical, particularly Stoic, models of self-control, reason, civility, and heroism, in constructing their physical image, consolidating, extending and fortifying the pre-revolutionary middle-class body, shaped by science, medicine and manners. However, in order to define the boundaries of this fortified political body, its exclusions had to be made explicit. This image excluded not only the aristocratic body, seen as frivolous and corrupt, and the lower class body, too physically active to be stoic, but also the female body, depicted in contemporary art and literature as emotional and sensitive. Furthermore, Elizabeth Colwill (1998) points out that the slave revolution in the French colony of Saint-Domingue in 1791, and the pro-slavery rhetoric that followed it, ultimately resulted in the expulsion of the black body from the political order as well, on grounds of its supposed primitivity. The Revolution thus cast the French political subject as exclusively middle-class, male and white. Conversely, the irrationality previously attributed to the peasant body, was now seen to inhabit the bodies of all the Revolution's others: the aristocracy, the lower classes, women, and cultural others. As Mary Ann Doane comments, regarding the much later but related phenomenon of the cinema spectator,

discussed in chapters 3-6, the denial of the white, male body is accomplished by the “projection of contingency and embodiment onto the white woman or racial other” (1993, 15). These became the irrational bodies with which the post-revolutionary grotesque was built.

Both Colwill and Outram emphasise the direct conflict that existed in French Revolutionary thought between the universal liberty posited by Enlightenment philosophy and foundational to the revolutionary cause, and the exclusions placed on the body politic that resulted from it. This contradiction was borne of the tensions already present in the Enlightenment’s attempt to democratise identity, while retaining the possibility of hierarchical superiority. The escalating struggle between the middle classes and the aristocracy for political and cultural hegemony towards the end of the eighteenth century subjected this tension to increasing stress, forcing rationalist models of society and the body to distinguish themselves more and more clearly from the primitive, lower class, feminine irrationalities that appeared to threaten them. The violence of the French Revolution drove a final wedge into this gap, creating a rupture that would traumatise the nineteenth century, and out of which romantic ballerinas and cancan dancers would emerge.

#### **2.4: Post-Revolutionary Romanticism and Romantic Ballet: The Rational Spectator and the Irrational Performer**

Post-revolutionary romanticism made an artform out of the tensions between the rational and the irrational that were born in the Enlightenment and ignited by the

French Revolution. In this section, it is argued that the emergence of a mutual interdependence between the romantic bohemians and the bourgeoisie created a context in which the opposition between the rational and the irrational would be enacted on the bodies of romantic ballet's spectators and performers. The physical spectacle of irrationality performed in romantic ballet would be taken on and developed by the cancan for the rest of the nineteenth century.

The Revolution illustrated both the liberatory potential of the irrational, embodied by the lower classes without whose support the aristocracy could not have been defeated, and its dangers, in the threat that the revolution of the rational middle classes could become the revolution of the lower classes or the colonised other. This made the irrational both more seductive and more threatening for the post-revolutionary elite (consisting of the middle class and the remnants of the aristocracy) and particularly for the romantic artist. The romantic, like the pre-revolutionary middle class, denied the existence of his own body, withdrawing into the subjectivity of his mind, guarding his rationality<sup>4</sup>. This retreat from the body was framed as a release, allowing the experience of higher, purer orders, untainted by the messiness of physicality. He engaged with the physical world only through his visual mastery of it. The distance between the rational, white, male artist and his irrational, natural, primitive, female muses, was both bridged and controlled by the act of looking<sup>5</sup>.

The post-revolutionary romantics, therefore, adopted a rationalist position that was not unlike that of the middle class. As Hauser (1951) points out, romanticism was not in the immediate post-revolutionary period an anti-classical

movement, and many romantics supported the Restoration monarchy. The opposition between romanticism and classicism arose, Hauser argues, in response to the gradual limitation of personal liberties under the monarchy of Charles X (1824-1830). As the achievements of the Revolution appeared to be slipping away, a split appeared in the middle-class between the wealthy bourgeoisie, who supported the monarchy, and romantic bohemians, who despised the bourgeoisie for their disloyalty to the values of 1789. The bohemian and the bourgeois emerged simultaneously, defining each other by their difference<sup>6</sup>. The bohemians took romanticism in a new direction. Adopting the liberatory rhetoric of the Revolution, they rejected classical art as bound by convention, and used the irrationality of the primitive, the feminine and the lower classes as a battering ram to smash the classical into fragments<sup>7</sup>. For example, Victor Hugo (1881), in his Preface to Cromwell, originally published in 1827, distinguished between classical and modern literature on the basis that the latter is freed and made more beautiful by the grotesque.

The bohemian represented the dark underside of a complex bourgeois identity. On one hand, the bourgeoisie was keen to distinguish itself from the lower classes with whom it had cooperated in the Revolution. While their support was necessary for victory, the taint of the low would retard bourgeois progress toward cultural hegemony. From this angle, the prudent position for the bourgeoisie to adopt was in alignment with classical aesthetics derived from the aristocracy and modified to represent the rational middle classes in the late eighteenth century. On the other hand, however, it was necessary for the bourgeoisie to construct an identity that was dissociated from the discredited aristocracy, and their exclusive,

sterile classicism. From this perspective, the irrationalism associated with the lower classes, the primitive, and the feminine, was appealing as a subversion of the classical<sup>8</sup>. Both the bohemians and the bourgeoisie felt the pull of both sides of this dichotomy: the bourgeois as outwardly respectable with a predilection for the low, and the bohemian as rebel against his own class, who could indulge in irrationality without fear of reproach because of his middle-class rational status.

The bohemians, with their ambiguous identity as both middle-class and anti-bourgeois, embodied the simultaneous fear and fascination that the irrational represented for the bourgeoisie as they attempted to negotiate the tightrope of modern identity, aristocratic pretension on one side, primitive irrationalism on the other. Jerrold Seigel (1999) describes bohemians as inhabiting the margins of bourgeois existence, and indeed, they were perceived by the bourgeoisie to stand at the gateway of an illicit but seductive underworld. This underworld consisted of all the primitive, lower class, feminine, irrational imagery that had been excluded in the construction of the rational, white, bourgeois, male political subject.

Bakhtin (1984) claimed that literary interest in this grotesque material subsided after its revival in French bohemian romanticism of the 1820s, not to return until the twentieth century. However, in doing so he ignores a crucial shift in the form of the irrational grotesque. The theoretical projection of embodiment onto the white woman or racial other that Doane (1993) observes at the end of the nineteenth century in cinema spectatorship, and that had its roots in the exclusive political subjecthood constructed during the French Revolution, now became

enacted in flesh and blood with the projection of the irrational onto the bodies of female romantic ballerinas who performed works such as *La Sylphide* (1832) and *Giselle* (1841).

The suitability of romantic ballet as a repository for bourgeois fears of the irrational, derived from its embodiment of the inversion of centralised, hierarchical power relations that the irrational itself represented. This inversion was partly figured in romantic ballet as the replacement of the display of the masculine body with the display of the feminine. Romantic ballet was the culmination of a long historical process of inverting the exclusively masculine court ballet developed by Louis XIII and reinforced by Louis XIV, into a dance form which centred on the female ballerina and subjugated the male dancer to a supporting role. Following the transformation of the court ballet into a public performance, and the replacement of the monarchy and courtiers with professional dancers, female dancers had been introduced in 1681. Cohen (2000) argues that the demise of the artful body, and the rise of the natural body in the early eighteenth century led to the increasing popularity of female dancers, such as Marianne Cupis de Camargo and Marie Sallé, who were thought to be closer to nature than their male counterparts. Romantic ballet continued this shift towards the feminine. Ballet was thus transformed from a spectacle of monarchical power, to a spectacle of bodies excluded from political power, from the hegemonic to the subversive.

This subversion was also evident in the increasing freedom with which the body could move within classical technique. Mark Franko (1993) argues that the

improvisatory freedom afforded by the subversive, grotesque-influenced, burlesque ballet performed at the French court between 1595 and the 1640s, had been driven underground by Louis XIV's establishment of the Royal Academy of Dancing in 1661. The court ballet thereafter reproduced the hierarchical structure of power, both in its centralised control of the peripheral limbs, and in the arrangement of bodies around the king. These ballets were highly choreographed, and the standard for corporeal style was set by the king's body. However, as ballet became detached from the centre of political power, and increasingly feminised in the eighteenth century, the balletic body came to symbolise not the hierarchical relations of power, but the relations between all people determined by natural law (see Foster, 1998). One of these natural laws was that of the difference between the sexes. In the Enlightenment this difference became characterised as that between the rational, disembodied male, whose body was bound by the conventions of culture, and the irrational, embodied female, whose body was closer to nature than culture and therefore free of the restrictions that culture imposed on men. This physical, but not political, liberation was highlighted by Marie Sallé when she performed her own choreography of Pygmalion (1734) without a panier (hoop) skirt and with her hair unadorned, wearing just a muslin dress. However, Sallé's movement still emulated the aristocratic body (Cohen, 2000). Romantic ballet drew on this association between femininity and physical freedom in its interpretation of classical movement. In the post-revolutionary period, lighter costume materials, shorter skirts, flat shoes, and flesh-coloured tights allowed much greater freedom of movement for female dancers, facilitating mobility in the torso, greater speed, and higher leg lifts (Chazin-Bennahum, 1997).



This relative liberation of the female body drew on the post-revolutionary, romantic glorification of freedom. However, the freedom of those groups excluded from the new body politic, such as women, was also a threat to the bourgeois, male political subject. Following the developments in natural and medical science in the eighteenth century, threats not only to the personal body, but to the French political body, were increasingly characterised as a disease attacking the health of the nation. Women, and particularly liberated women, constituted just such a mortal threat. Felicia McCarren (1998) has argued that in romantic ballet, freedom of movement in the female body was pathologised as the lack of physical control symptomatic of hysteria. Hysteria became a key female trope in the nineteenth century as the spectacle of the irrational displayed on the pathological female body.

This was just the sort of body in whom the romantic was interested for its liberatory connotations, but from which he must separate himself if he wished to maintain his rationality. This distanced fascination could be achieved through the role of spectator, using the gaze to mediate the relationship between the rational spectator and irrational spectacle. Ballet critics, such as the writer Théophile Gautier (1811-1872), carved out this spectatorial identity, and the male bourgeoisie, looking to the bohemians for ways to satisfy their desire for the low, took up the role with relish. The denial of male embodiment and its projection onto the female other was made physically manifest in this relation of male spectator to female dancer.

For the romantic, this release from the body was thought to allow the experience of a purer, higher realm. In *La Sylphide* (1832), choreographed by Filippo Taglioni and starring his daughter Marie Taglioni, this spiritual escape was narrativised. As the sylph, Taglioni embodied the low other (feminine, natural, inhuman) who promised to liberate the worldly male from the ties of ordinary life. She danced *en pointe*, a technique developed in the 1820s (Chazin-Bennahum, 1997), to convey the weightlessness and ethereality of an otherworldly being (see Figure 1). Gautier effusively described her unearthly physicality in 1837:

she flies like a spirit in the midst of the transparent clouds of white muslin with which she loves to surround herself, she resembles a happy angel who scarcely bends the petals of celestial flowers with the tips of her pink toes.

Gautier, 1983, 431



**Figure 1: Marie Taglioni in La Sylphide**

However, this sense of exaltation to the sublime veils a lower interest. The “virginal” (Gautier, 1983, 431) sylph, like many inhabitants of the excluded, irrational realm, was also a source of sexual curiosity and desire. As grotesques, their bodies were both open to interaction with other bodies, and engaged in the physical processes of reproduction, birth and death, sexualising them in comparison with the apparently closed, rational body of the male spectator. Bakhtin (1984) notes that in the opposition between the classical and the grotesque, the notions of ‘high’ and ‘low’ are mapped directly onto space and the body, so that higher parts of the body, such as the head, are related to the classical, whereas lower parts of the body belong to the grotesque realm. Although romantic ballet still emphasised upward motion and the denial of

gravity in the pointework and weightlessness of the ethereal sylph, it also played with the revelation and concealment of the lower half of the body.

In particular, Abigail Solomon-Godeau notes, “the legs of the dancers are the focus of the fetishizing gaze of the male spectator” (Solomon-Godeau cited in McCarren, 1998, 81), for whom the highlights of the performance were the pirouettes that raised the dancers’ skirts. A decree of Louis XV had made tights obligatory for performers, but, as McCarren points out, the concealment of dancers’ legs under tights only provided an excuse for their revelation.

Therefore, tights simultaneously allowed dancers freedom of movement, while allowing the male spectators freedom of surveillance. However, this unrestricted gaze was subject to fluctuations in the restrictions that bourgeois morality placed on female modesty, reflected in alternate orders to raise and lower dancer’s skirt lengths throughout the nineteenth century. For example, Ivor Guest records that in 1824 the Indendant of the Paris Opéra ordered dancers’ skirts to be lengthened, “so as not to inspire “carnal thoughts” in the gentlemen who sat near the stage” (Guest cited in McCarren, 1998, 77-78), but in the 1840s, after the July Revolution had led to attempts by the Opéra to offer a spectacle aimed at the bourgeois male spectator, skirts were shortened again from mid-calf to knee-length (Solomon-Godeau cited in McCarren, 1998, 78 and 235). The desire enflamed by the spectacle of feminine legs, could be satisfied by only the wealthiest patrons of the Paris Opéra at the *Foyer de la Danse*, a private backstage salon where a select few could meet the dancers, and perhaps arrange a more intimate liaison. This allowed the largely working-class dancers to

supplement their income, whilst the Opéra profited from institutionalised prostitution.

The low attraction of romantic ballet became more and more central to its construction of the dancing body in the 1830s, as the romantic ballerina's irrationality became constituted not just by its femininity, but by its exoticism or even primitivism. As Connelly (1995) points out, in the early nineteenth century the boundaries of the European self were still quite proximal, and even countries at the margins of Europe were considered exotic. *La Sylphide*'s Scottish setting had been appealing for its exoticism in 1832, but, according to Lisa Arkin (1994), Spain quickly came to predominate as France's primary other. Arkin observes that romantic writers, "saw Spain as impulsive, violent, passionate, reclusive, sad, and unliberated;... the antithesis of the academicism of France" (1994, 304). This otherness was figured not only as cultural but racial, described by Charles Baudelaire as "black Spain", and by Victor Hugo as "half African" (cited in Arkin, 1994, 304 and 307). As such, the difference posited between the two countries was physical, evident in bodies which manifested different racial histories. Following the Enlightenment historicisation of rationality as a progression from the irrational to the rational, Spanish body movement was judged to be "irrational", "antithetical to the "classical" behavior considered appropriate for the proper French woman" (Arkin, 1994, 315).

Just as the spectacle of the dancing woman connoted both liberation and irrationality, generating both fascination and fear for the bourgeois spectator, and particularly for the bohemian, the spectacle of Spanish dancing had the same

effect. In the 1820s and 1830s, Spanish dance troupes toured Paris performing the *escuela bolera*, the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Spanish dance technique which blended Andalusian dance with Italian and French classical ballet (Arkin, 1994). This classical/anticlassical hybrid appeared both to liberate academic French choreography and to challenge its superiority. According to Ivor Guest, Spanish dancing was already “the rage of Paris” (1980, 149) when Fanny Elssler, a romantic ballerina, performed the *cachucha*, a form of *escuela bolera*, to critical acclaim in the ballet *Le Diable Boiteux* on the Paris Opéra stage in 1836. According to Arkin, Elssler used her classical ballet training to adapt the already hybrid dance so as not to offend the Opéra authorities, while “retain[ing] the raw flavor of the original *cachucha* – its spiralling torso, hip movements, rhythmic qualities, use of castanets, Spanish footwork and port de bras, and its sensual nature” (Arkin, 1994, 319). An anonymous French commentator, whose account was published in 1887, described how Elssler took the risk of performing Spanish movement, while making it acceptable:

She dared to imitate the undulating and broken gait of Dolores [one of the Spanish dancers who performed at the Opéra], to drown her eyes with love, to arm her hands with castanets, and unrestrainedly throw back her flexible arched waist! [...] She dared twist her lower back, stir her torso, drop her head like a flower overladen with perfumes and let drift her languid lifeless arms.

anon. cited in Cordova, 1999, 292

Figure 2 shows Elssler performing the *cachucha*. Her raised left hip has thrown her torso to the right, and out of classical alignment. Her arms appear relaxed and mobile, while the bend in her left wrist breaks the classical line.



**Figure 2: Fanny Elssler performing the *cachucha***

It was this incorporation of irrational elements into the classical French body and onto the classical French stage that caused a sensation, distinguishing Elssler from Taglioni, whose more classical technique allowed an escape into a higher realm, rather than a lower, exotic one. This contrast was sharply delineated in the contemporary press, dividing balletomanes according to their affiliation (Guest, 1980). Gautier characterised the distinction in religious terms, labelling Taglioni a “Christian dancer”, and Elssler a “pagan dancer”:

Fanny Elssler’s dancing is quite different from the academic idea, it has a particular character which sets her apart from all other dancers; it is not the aerial and virginal grace of Taglioni, it is something more human, more appealing to the senses.

Gautier, 1983, 431

In other words, Elssler's dancing invited the breakdown of bodily barriers characteristic of the grotesque and the irrational. Elssler's *cachucha* inspired a craze for the incorporation into romantic ballet of not only Spanish dances, but also dances from other 'exotic' countries at the margins of Europe. Erik Aschengreen (1974) argues that Elssler's emergence as a rival to Taglioni indicates a shift in French romanticism towards the "sensuous, passionate aspect of this movement" (1974, 19), that is, towards the irrational and the 'low'. By the time Elssler performed the *cachucha*, the cancan was already developing this trend, drawing on romantic ballet movement in its more radical construction of the irrational dancing body. However, Elssler's simultaneous embodiment of both femininity and primitivity would influence the cancan and the development of the irrational body for the rest of the century.

## **2.5: The Contredanse and the Quadrille: A Liberal Space for Civilised Bodies**

While romantic ballerinas were embodying the irrational on the Paris Opéra stage, the new freedoms of the post-revolutionary body were also being performed in the ballroom. As with ballet, the liberation of the body in social dance had begun in the Enlightenment, and by the 1820s had reached a form in which the competing demands of classicism and anti-classicism, rationality and irrationality, could no longer be reconciled. At this point, romantic ballet and social dance would come together in a dance, the cancan, which finally turned against classical aesthetics.



The cancan emerged as a variation on the quadrille, a social dance popular in the 1820s in France. The quadrille itself was a standardisation of the *contredanse française* (Clark, 2002), a French version of the English ‘country dance’ learnt by French dancing masters on trips to England in the seventeenth century (Thomas, 2004). The first evidence of the performance of the contredanse in France dates to 1684 (Thurston cited in Thomas, 2004, 286). With its non-hierarchical arrangement of dancers as a social group, the contredanse revolutionised French court dancing, embodying the de-centralisation of political and social power that was already taking place within the French aristocracy (Cohen, 2000). It was performed primarily at masquerade balls, and complimented the disguising of identity, and temporary release from the burdens of rank, that the masquerade facilitated. This muddying of the clear waters of hierarchy was unsettling to those whose status depended on this system. For example, Elizabeth Charlotte, the Duchesse d’Orléans complained in 1701 that, “One cannot tell nowadays who is who” (Charlotte cited in Cohen, 2000, 160). The classical body, and the ability to move with grace, was no longer a sure indicator of nobility, a fact that was celebrated in the contredanse.

The levelling effect of the contredanse was perceived to emanate from the peasant origins of the English ‘country dance’, as were the “rustic gestures” that accompanied it, such as “tapping the toe, the heel, and the whole foot on the ground; hand clapping; and shaking and wagging one’s finger” (Cohen, 2000, 205). These non-classical movements, the sorts of movements that would later be labelled irrational, were subject to criticism by dancing masters, whose careers rested on the exclusivity of aristocratic grace. Pierre Rameau (1674-1748), for

example, claimed in 1725 that it encouraged dancers to, “torment the body... to tap their feet like sabot-makers [clog-makers], and to strike many postures that are not at all decorous” (Cohen, 2000, 205). This strategy of criticising movement that challenges the hierarchical or rational construction of the body by implying that it drags the dancers down through the class system, or by appealing to apparently timeless classical aesthetics, would be repeated often in bourgeois critiques of the quadrille and the cancan.

The spread of the contredanse from the court to Parisian ballrooms in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, was part of the widespread imitation of the aristocratic body by those who hoped to achieve upward social mobility (see Cohen, 2000). A tension therefore existed between the embodiment of an exclusive nobility in the contredanse, and its accessibility as a dance whose steps, simpler than those of the couple dances such as the minuet that preceded it, could be learnt from dance manuals. This contradiction made the dance attractive to the bourgeoisie of the early nineteenth century, who were eager to prove their civility as successors to the aristocracy while rejecting aristocratic elitism. However, by the post-revolutionary period, the breakdown of class distinctions, to which the contredanse responded, had reached a new level. The Revolution had taken the levelling of hierarchical identity observed by the Duchesse d’Orléans, and turned it into a permanent, pervasive social condition. Paradoxically, this made the construction and display of identity more important than ever, especially for the rising bourgeoisie. The changes made to the contredanse during this period, responded to this new context. The dance was standardised and simplified, making it accessible to all levels of society, but it

maintained the aesthetic of civilised sociality that made its performance appealing as a signifier of social superiority. This new version of the contredanse, which had reached a stable form by 1820, was often called the quadrille (Clark, 2002). Figure 3 shows the social group formation that the quadrille facilitated, but also its maintenance of civilised bodily deportment, characterised by verticality, weightlessness, restraint, classical proportion and alignment, and limited body contact.



**Figure 3: An engraving by Lebas showing the L'été figure of the quadrille in the early 1820s**

The quadrille was defined by its ability to “address... without distinction all the classes of society” (Brunet cited in Clark, 2002, 508), as noted by Brunet in a dance manual published in 1839. This was due not only to its standardisation and simplification, but by the new mobility with which the bourgeoisie could move between dance venues frequented by different classes, facilitating the

popularisation of the dance beyond class boundaries. Some, following the rhetoric employed a century before by Rameau, perceived this as a degradation of the civilised contredanse; for others, it illustrated the fact that civility was not limited to the aristocracy, but was a characteristic of the newly liberated people of France (Clark, 2002). These contradictory reactions revealed a question that lay at the heart of the quadrille: was the progression towards equality, evidenced by the dispersal of monarchical power amongst the aristocracy that had been embodied in the contredanse, and by the erasure of class distinctions embodied in the quadrille, a move towards universal liberation, as the Revolution had claimed, or a relinquishment of the rationalisation and freedom that the elite had achieved, leading to a gradual decline into the enslavement to bodily needs and desires perceived to be the state of the lower classes? This question was grounded in the Enlightenment debate over the meaning of the historical human progression towards rationality. However, the implications of rejecting a narrative of inexorable human improvement, first articulated by Rousseau, had taken a pessimistic turn during the Revolution. Irrationality, previously merely a theoretical counterpoint to the rational values of European civilisation, had become personified, as far as the middle class were concerned, by cultural others, women and the lower classes. Their threat, brought violently home in the French and Haitian Revolutions, was no mere theory, but embodied reality. The question posed by the quadrille, therefore, was not of merely academic significance; it concerned the historical destiny of the French nation.

Since the Revolution, this destiny had been extremely uncertain. While the absolute monarchy had been removed, the Revolution had failed to produce a

workable replacement system in line with its aims, and the advantage taken of this situation by Napoleon Bonaparte had driven the country back into monarchy by 1815. The power of the Restoration monarchy was restricted by an elected parliament, but the electorate was limited to property-owning men who paid over 300 francs per year in tax (Magraw, 1983, 23). Was this to be the final result of the Revolution, or was the Revolution merely the beginning of a journey towards universal liberation? Answers to this question obviously bore the mark of class interests. For many members of the *grande bourgeoisie* and the remaining aristocracy who supported the Restoration monarchy in the 1820s, maintenance of limited suffrage offered political and social security and stability, and thus the negation of social boundaries promoted by the quadrille represented a threat. For those who were disenfranchised by this system, however, including women, the *petit bourgeoisie* and the lower classes, the quadrille offered a vision of a society in which the civility and power of the elite could be shared by all. Indeed Maribeth Clark (2002) argues that bourgeois acceptance of the simplification of the contredanse in the quadrille, was split down gender lines, with male commentators describing it as tiresome, while bourgeois women welcomed the dance as “the very picture of French society” (Clark, 2002, 510).

For those at the very bottom of the social scale, however, the quadrille had not yet gone far enough. Although it eroded class barriers, it did so using the bourgeois model of the civilised, rational body, which young members of the working class, in particular, found increasingly restrictive (Price, 1998, 3; Cordova, 1999, 140). From the Revolution until the 1820s, this mode of physicality had enjoyed an unopposed rise to dominance. The irrationality

against which it defined itself had been personified in the cultural other, the feminine and the lower classes, but it had not yet been formed into a unified aesthetic to rival the rational body. In the late 1820s, however, the bourgeoisie themselves began to fan the flames of working-class unrest in an attempt to use workers as foot soldiers in a revolt against the Restoration monarchy (Magraw, 1983, 48-49). The renewed class-consciousness, self-determination and liberatory spirit that this caused coincided with rumours of a new theatrical development, romantic ballet, that was causing a sensation at the Paris Opéra. Anti-bourgeois working-class culture and the irrational body of the ballerina would come together in the emergence of a new dance form, the cancan.

## **2.6: The Emergence of the Cancan: the Construction of a Grotesque Body Politic**

François Gasnault's (1986) research suggests that in the late 1820s, at some of the *guinguettes* (working class dance halls) on the outskirts of Paris, working-class male dancers began to incorporate into their performances of the quadrille, an imitation and parody of the freedom of movement that they had heard was being performed on the Paris Opéra stage in romantic ballet. Ticket prices prohibited their direct observation of the ballets, so their innovations were inspired by the *idea* of danced irrational movement, as well as demonstrations from those, such as soldiers, who had received dancing lessons. This parody was achieved by importing into the quadrille the real or imagined features of romantic ballet which most strongly subverted the rational, classically-influenced construction of the body. For example, centralised control of the limbs was

replaced with fragmented body parts, allowing extremities to move in isolation. The break between the upper and lower parts of the body, for instance, was emphasised by kicking the legs. This democratisation of physical control drew on romantic ballet's embodiment of the decentralisation of power in the body and society. However, whereas romantic ballet found freedom of movement within the classical *danse d'école*, the cancan used freedom of movement to dismember the classical body. Paul Smith described this development retrospectively in 1841:

Instead of moving all together as one with the most elegance and grace possible, they invented foot movements, arm movements and head movements.

Smith cited in Cordova, 1999, 202-03

Furthermore, the centralised control of body movement in society, represented by the monopolisation of the power to create dances by dancing masters who taught set choreographies, was overturned by placing value on individual improvisation. Smith continues his description:

No more set forms, no more routine, no more uniformity: on the contrary, it is an onslaught of witty and comic pantomimes, a running fire of silent sallies. In a word, under this system, the contredanse is a dramatic form in which everyone improvises according to his or her genius and emphasises his or her individuality.

Smith cited in Cordova, 1999, 203

These subversive variations on the quadrille were called the cancan, or *chahut*, meaning 'uproar', although they continued to exist within the quadrille form, often constituting its final figure, and so the term 'quadrille' also encompassed this new development.

In the cancan, two lineages of anti-hierarchical dance practices converged. The first was the line of the social contredanse and quadrille, in which the non-hierarchical arrangement and interaction of dancers represented the opening up of new liberal political and social spaces in society. However, even in the quadrille, these spaces could only be inhabited by rational, civilised bodies. The second line was that of romantic ballet, which had developed an irrational body, but placed it under subordination and surveillance in the institution of the Paris Opéra. The cancan brought the irrational body of romantic ballet into the egalitarian context of the quadrille, the social and political space from which the irrational had previously been excluded. This allowed the dancing body to evoke radical new social and political possibilities.

The early cancan was not a single coherent form, but an umbrella term for various types of improvisation within the quadrille. For example, one variation was called *la Robert-Macaire* (Cordova, 1999, 291) after a liberal but unscrupulous character in the play *L'Auberge des andrets* (1823) by Honore Daumier, played by Frederick Lemaitre, who later wrote another play around the character (1834). This variation was developed by the early male performers of the dance, who improvised in such a way that they, “conveyed an egotistical spirit which distinctly resembled the dandy’s suburban state” (Gasnault, 1986, 55, translated by Kath Higgins). Dandyism, which had emerged in Britain in the Revolutionary Era, entered France at the end of the Napoleonic Wars (1815) as a form of male identity through which aristocrats could reassert their social distinction. The dandy could be distinguished by his use of dress, language and



leisurely activity to denote his superiority, drawing on the pre-revolutionary construction of the aristocratic body as a spectacle of power. However, as Jerrold Seigel (1999) notes, “French dandyism tended to collapse the distance separating it from the opposite theater of self-dramatization, Bohemia” (1999, 102). Both the defeated aristocrat and the middle-class bohemian attempted to escape their particular class fate by asserting a status that was not inherent but performed through the strategic display of the body. By adopting the physicality of the dandy, the early working-class performers of the Robert-Macaire variation of the cancan perhaps mocked their pretensions, but also appropriated their performance of social mobility as a protest against their class situation.

While liberatory individualism remained a strong influence on the cancan for the rest of the century, this was held in tension with another impulse that would grow in significance through the nineteenth century and come to dominate the dance in the twentieth century, the impulse to break down individual barriers to form an undifferentiated, grotesque mass. The use of the grotesque body as a model for society was an idea that was being developed politically and intellectually at the time when the cancan emerged. According to Daniel Pick, the model of “[s]ociety... as a body which could grow and develop, but also suffer illness, crisis, perhaps even death” (Pick, 1989, 62), was first articulated theoretically in the work of Henri de Saint-Simon (1760-1825) and his followers, which gained prominence around 1830. These ‘utopian socialists’, as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) called them in their 1848 Communist Manifesto, or ‘romantic socialists’, as scholars have more recently called them (Andrews, 2002), used the possibility of figuring society as a grotesque body to offer a

radically anti-bourgeois vision of social utopia. Whereas the body politic constructed by the revolutionary middle class had been hierarchical, exclusive and male, the romantic socialists created a vision of society that was co-operative, inclusive and female. Like the romantics before them, they idealised the female body's grotesque associations with reproduction and birth. The innovation of the romantic socialists, however, was to transform female identity into a political position and a utopian vision of society as nurturing, self-sacrificing and liberatory<sup>9</sup>.

The popularity of Saint-Simonian ideas amongst the working class increased dramatically after the July Revolution of 1830 (Magraw, 1983, 91). The overthrow of the Restoration Monarchy was followed by bourgeois attempts to repress the working-class agitation that they themselves had encouraged and that had helped them achieve victory. According to Roger Magraw, “[d]espotism shifted from château to Stock Exchange” (Magraw, 1983, 49), and the electoral franchise was extended only marginally to men who paid at least 200 francs in tax. This precipitated, “several years of popular disturbances, peaking in August 1830 and early 1832, in which workers and peasants tested the ability, and discovered the unwillingness, of the new regime to satisfy their grievances” (Magraw, 1983, 49). In this context, romantic socialism offered the workers an alternative to the bourgeois model of society, based on the inclusive principles of the grotesque female body. The Saint-Simonians encouraged this interest, as the rise of the working class to equality with the bourgeoisie formed a major part of their social vision (Andrews, 2002).

The romantic socialist ideal corresponded well with the social model implicit in the democratised body of the cancan, but unlike the feminised body of romantic socialism, the cancan was initially danced only by working class men, while their female partners stood still (Gasnault, 1986, 53). However, the expanding awareness of romantic socialism after 1830, and the incipient feminisms that it encouraged, meant that the female body became increasingly associated with liberation and with political alternatives to hierarchy. In this context, working class women appropriated the liberating movements of the cancan, allowing working-class men and women to perform the dance together. The influence of romantic socialism on the dance was acknowledged in the quadrille *à la Saint-Simoniennne*, described by Nicholas Green, in which, “the participants constantly swapp[ed] partners in a parody of the free-love doctrines of utopian socialism” (Green, 1990, 78).

The image of the breakdown of sexual barriers that the quadrille *à la Saint-Simoniennne* evoked drew on another type of grotesque body used by the romantic socialists as a social model: the androgyne (see Andrews, 2003). In the nineteenth-century context, opposition to the rational, white, male subject took the form not only of the ‘other’ (in this case, the female), but also the hybrid (such as the androgyne), which threatened the self not by its difference, but by its implication that the difference between the self and the other did not exist (see Stallybrass and White, 1986). In contrast to the closed, rational, male body, the androgyne that recurred in romantic socialist writings was a body with “indeterminate bodily boundaries and internally divided nature” (Andrews, 2003, 439). Like the female body, the androgyne offered a model of society that was

grotesque in its unboundedness and inclusivity, erasing the hard lines of gender distinction that were crucial to the maintenance of an exclusively male body politic. This is precisely the implication that both disturbed and excited bourgeois observers of the male/female cancan<sup>10</sup>. In Gustave Flaubert's 1869 novel A Sentimental Education, the interpenetration of male and female garments in the cancan implied an evaporation of social and sexual boundaries that created a new, undifferentiated social crowd:

People were crammed together, thoroughly enjoying themselves; hat-strings had come loose and were tangling with neckties, boots were sliding under petticoats; the whole bunch were bouncing up and down in time with the music

Flaubert, 2000, 78

The liberation from sexual division that the cancan promised gave it a dangerous appeal that facilitated its demolition of another boundary, that of class. Like the female romantic ballerina, the female cancan dancer represented both an attraction and a threat to bourgeois men. Her femininity, class status and fragmented, improvised body movement constituted everything he defined himself against. Furthermore, the cancan dissolved the stable identities on which the security of his standing in society depended. However, these same features made her the embodiment of the freedom and anti-classicism that had brought the bourgeoisie to power, and that could release him from the restrictions of his own place in the social hierarchy. This aspect of the cancan dancer held a particular allure for young bourgeois men, such as students, for whom status was less important than freedom. These men visited working class dance halls in search of social and sexual liberation. According to Sarah Davies Cordova (1999), after learning the *chahut*, they took the young working class women

(*grisettes*) who they had met there to the public carnival balls, where all classes mixed. There they performed as cross-class couples, elaborating on the cancan steps even further, creating a spectacle of the dissolution of gender and class boundaries through irrational movement, a spectre of that which the bourgeoisie most desired and feared.

The late 1830s and 1840s saw the cancan break the final body boundary to which the bourgeoisie clung, that between the French and the cultural other. The popularity of Spanish dancing, catalysed by Elssler's performance of the *cachucha* in 1836, prompted the widespread incorporation of 'exotic' movements into the dance (Guest, 1980; Cordova, 1999). These might have included the bends, twists and undulations described by the anonymous observer of Elssler in section 2.4. The cancan's association with the irrational movement of the exotic primitive would deepen from this point on, eventually becoming a major source of anxiety for bourgeois spectators in the 1890s. In 1844 the craze for the polka, a dance from Bohemia, then in the Hapsburg Monarchy and now in the Czech Republic, swept the ballrooms of Paris and influenced the cancan with its Eastern European exoticism (Cordova, 1999). According to Céleste Mogador, a courtesan who found fame as a cancan dancer during the polka craze, the polka-influenced cancan involved the simultaneous isolation of a number of body parts: "arms, legs, body, head, everything was moving at once" (Mogador, 2001, 87). The cancan had evolved from a white, male, working class variation on the quadrille into a cross-gender, cross-class, cross-cultural hybrid. This grotesque openness to other bodies permeated the dance, and manifested itself in the cancan's movement and connotations in multiple ways.

## 2.7: The Cancan as Grotesque

In the cancan, the grotesque construction of the dancing body that had briefly flourished in the seventeenth-century burlesque ballet, but was suppressed by Louis XIV (Franko, 1993), re-emerged in a different form and context. In this section, contemporary descriptions and illustrations of the cancan are used to show the various facets of the dance's grotesquerie.

Firstly, the unbounded body that Bakhtin (1984) describes was seen to be evident in the cancan's ability to exceed the boundaries of the body, or at least the boundaries of the rational body. For example, James Jackson Jarves (1855), an American traveller, says of the cancan in his Parisian travelogue:

in the excitement and activity of the cancan, it would seem as if human muscles, or, at all events, garments, must give way.... Imagination can not conceive of any thing more grotesque than some of its figures.... In their excitement, the dancers literally strive to jump out of their skins.

Jarves, 1855, 180

The movements and energy of the cancan are perceived to extend beyond the limits of what is deemed acceptable for the rational body. Furthermore, this description evokes an image of the rational boundary of the skin and the musculature as confinements from which the dancers seek, energetically, to escape, suggesting an implicit critique of the rational body in cancan movement.

Secondly, the cancan's extension of the body beyond its rational boundaries, leads the dancer into distortions, or contortions, of the classical frame. For

example, Jarves continues his description of cancan dancers by claiming that, “[t]hey make more contortions than an impaled worm” (1855, 180). Again, this metaphor connotes the body’s attempt to escape from restrictions placed on its movement, and it does this by using movements and energy that deform the classical ideal so violently that it becomes inhuman. Bayle St. John (1854), a British author and traveller, cites a range of non-classical movements performed in the cancan, drawing his metaphor not from the animal world, but from the mechanical one:

Dancing has been transformed into a violent kind of gymnastics, in which genteel young men kick up their legs, wag their heads, distort their bodies, and scatter their arms, elbows, and hands, exactly as if they were puppets hung on wires.

St. John, 1854, 275

St. John’s description highlights the fact that the distortion of the classical body also results in its fragmentation. This is evident in an illustration of the cancan that accompanies Jarves’ description.



**Figure 4: Illustration of the cancan leger. Reproduced in Jarves (1855, 180)**

In the '*cancan leger*' (Figure 4), the male dancer is depicted performing isolated body movements: he turns his head to the left, shifts his shoulders to the right, raises his left hip, bends his right knee, and flexes his right foot. The wholeness of his body is broken by a series of angles, at the elbows, knee and ankles creating a zig-zag that disturbs any expectation of vertical, classical alignment. Just as the classical body represented the centralised control of the monarchical political system, the fragmented body of the cancan suggested the fragmentation of the body politic, and democratisation of control. The independent movement of localised body parts was a particular threat in the case of those parts considered to be 'low', such as the legs. The isolated movement of the legs signified the evasion of rational control by certain, supposedly irrational, sections of the body politic, such as women, the lower classes, and the colonial other. This capacity of the legs to act outside of the jurisdiction of rationality is evident in John Sanderson's description of the 1836 carnival season in Paris:

Men and women of the most sober habits, but ten minutes before – men and women who all day long were in the entire possession of their senses – the moment it strikes twelve, pour out like a deluge upon the street... until they get together in the theatre, or some great town hall, and there they dance the whole night long, as if their legs had taken leave of their senses.

Sanderson, 1847, 171

From 1830-1870 the cancan was mostly associated by the bourgeoisie with the carnival season and with masquerade balls, both of which permitted identity play and inversions of the social order within certain limits. This corresponds with Bakhtin's location of the grotesque body in the realm of the carnivalesque, the culture of opposition to the official realm. The carnivalesque, like the grotesque, first emerged in opposition to the culture of classical antiquity (Bakhtin, 1984),



and accordingly, cancan dancers were sometimes described as participants in Saturnalia (for example, Sue, 2004, 357), Roman festivals in which hierarchies, between masters and slaves for example, were turned on their head.

The most politically radical aspect of the cancan's grotesquerie was its capacity to meld bodies differentiated by gender, class and culture into an undifferentiated, Saturnalian mass. Bakhtin claims that the grotesque body often contains two bodies in one (Bakhtin, 1984, 26), and indeed the capacity of the cancan to break the body's boundaries, meant that bodies that would otherwise have been kept separate in the bourgeois world, could be physically connected. This is clearly shown in illustrations of the cancan published in 1845 and reproduced by David Price (1998) (Figure 5).



**Figure 5: Illustrations of the cancan published in 1845. Reproduced in Price (1998, 27)**

In the first picture, the dissolution of physical boundaries between the male and female dancers is shown by the direct eye contact between the two. This contrasts with the coy glances between male and female partners allowed in the etiquette of the quadrille (see Figure 3, p. 75). In the second picture, barriers between the sexes are demolished completely through body contact between male and female dancers, and moreover, body contact at the pelvis. Again, a comparison can be made with the quadrille, in which physical contact between partners was ideally only ever hand-to-hand and fleeting.

The cancan body enveloped not just male and female, but working class and bourgeois, French and exotic, joining these into an undifferentiated crowd that threatened both the physical boundaries of the rational, male, bourgeois body and the political boundaries of the bourgeois body politic. The danger to the bourgeois order posed by unidentified ‘others’, was of increasing concern after the working class and feminist agitation that followed 1830, particularly in urban Paris. This threat was fictionalised in Eugene Sue’s 1843 novel, Mysteries of Paris, which gave form to the bourgeoisie’s fears by depicting the sordid activities of a Parisian criminal underworld. Sue describes one of his shady characters, “overdoing the most grotesque and most impudent positions of the Chahut” (Sue, 2004, 356). He concludes the episode by highlighting the capacity of the cancan to embody the danger to Parisian society posed by his crowd of criminal others:

let the reader imagine all that is lowest, most shameless, and most monstrous in this idle, reckless, rapacious, sanguinary debauch, which shows itself more hostile to social order, and to which we have wished to call the attention of reflecting persons on terminating this

recital. May this last horrible scene symbolize the imminent peril which continually menaces society!

Sue, 2004, 357

The cancan was perceived by many to embody the disturbing presence of others within the rational body politic. Furthermore, its grotesque, open body threatened to engulf more and more of civilised society, necessitating its forceful containment.

## **2.8: The Repression of the Cancan**

One of the earliest written references to the cancan is contained in a record of an 1829 court session which discussed the “public act of indecency which a dance called cancan constitutes” (Matoré cited in Cordova, 1999, 171). The response by the authorities to this attack on the rational body politic was, as Foucault (1991) might have predicted, surveillance and physical repression. By 1829 a journalist could state that, “There exist at certain balls dance inspectors who... stand by the orchestra, and from there observe anything which may be contrary to decency” (Anon. cited in Cordova, 1999, 302). These inspectors are often described in accounts of the cancan as “municipal guards” or policemen, and their duty, as laid out in the Policeman’s Manual of 1831, was as follows:

Police overseeing dances must be on their guard to prevent any indecent dance such as the chahut and the cancan etc. taking place. If, after being invited to desist, those who indulge in such dances pay no attention, they must be taken before the commissars of the police district, because they are committing a crime covered by article 330 of the Penal Code (Crime against public manners)<sup>11</sup>.

Barlet cited in Gasnault, 1986, 47, translated by Kath Higgins

Gasnault counts about forty reports of trials for indecent dancing in the Gazette des tribunaux between 1829 and 1841, without a single acquittal, although he suspects that this may be a modest sample of the trials that actually took place (Gasnault, 1986, 51-52 and 56). On one hand, the criminalisation of the cancan represented a serious attempt to defend not only public decency, but also the integrity and dominance of the rational body. St. John observed of cancan dancers that,

Many emulate ballet-dancers in the audacity of their pirouettes, although the police seem to have definite orders as to the height to which a toe may be raised without offence to official morality. They are there, as everywhere, with their cadaverous faces and cocked hats, looking keenly out for “contraventions.” No saucy garter can flash on the sight without bringing down the thunders of authority.  
St. John, 1854, 276

On the other hand, Cordova notes that the scale of this operation meant that many smaller venues went unchecked. Many accounts relay the ease with which the gaze of the police could be evaded. Jarves observed that,

In all of these places the dancing is graceful and decorous while the *sergent de ville* looks in, but when his back is turned, or his eyes have assumed a convenient abstraction, fast and furious grows the dance, till... the excitement and activity of the *cancan* [begins.]  
Jarves, 1855, 180, original emphasis

Gasnault argues that the dance was a performance of the rejection of authority, which sometimes spilled over into violence towards the police (Gasnault, 1986, 56). These acts of insolence were most threatening to the authorities when they evoked the power of undifferentiated masses. In the following account by St.

John, it is the lack of reason, the lack of rational bodily and political boundaries in the crowd that necessitates its policing:

No doubt, considering the materials of which these assemblies are in great part composed, the presence of the police prevents many licentious excesses; and it is necessary to notice this fact, because the public balls in the neighbourhood of Paris and within the walls are attended on some evenings of the week, and in some seasons, by thousands and thousands, not only of rakish young men and women of equivocal character, but of servant-maids, tradesmen's wives, whose domestic habits have been "disturbed," a great portion of the rank and file of sham-genteel society, by all the students in law and physic, by lawyers' clerks, by shopmen, by respectable bourgeois escaping from their families, by young fashionables, and by an immense number of strangers of high and low degree. *This mass of varied composition is not sufficiently reasonable to ensure the preservation of tolerably decorous conduct*; and the presence of one or more alguazils [policemen] armed with rapiers [swords], and empowered, if necessary, to call in the guard, is found to be essential.

St. John, 1854, 276-77, emphasis added

Here, the "mass" attracted to the public balls by the prospect of the classless cancan, is too irrational, too physical and undifferentiated, to prevent the outbreak of the wrong type of freedom (licentiousness), and further offences to the rational body (indecorous conduct). The solution is the threat of physical violence to this unruly body, in order to forcibly separate it into its rational constituent parts.

The assertion that the cancan encourages the wrong sort of freedom is echoed by Jarves, but he makes explicit the link between the liberation of the body in the cancan and the liberation of France's body politic. After discussing and illustrating the grotesquerie of the cancan's movements and "the climax of license in this art" (Jarves, 1855, 180), the American moves directly into a critique of French "democracy". Unlike the United States, Jarves argues, "[t]he

only democracy [France] has thus far known is anarchy, from the evils of which she finds her sole remedy in despotism” (1855, 181). For Jarves, the cancan embodies a political system whose freedom has gone beyond the bounds of rational control, necessitating authoritarian repression, a conclusion with which the French authorities clearly concurred. The difference between the French perception of the cancan and that “seen through American spectacles” (1855, title), however, was that whereas for Jarves the cancan represented a body politic that was already present, for many French observers the cancan manifested a political spectre that had been exorcised, but continually threatened to return.

## **2.9: The Cancan and Revolution**

In the Revolution of 1789, the merging of male and female, worker and bourgeois, in the revolutionary mob, was necessary for success, but the power of the crowd to invert the social order changed from a weapon of liberation into a threat when the bourgeoisie became the new elite, leading to the exclusion of women and the working class from the body politic on grounds of their irrationality. The cancan reunited those identities that had been segregated since the Revolution, and was therefore thought to be capable of throwing France back into revolutionary chaos, possibly with results less favourable to the bourgeoisie.

The irrational body politic of the cancan was often conceived to have been born out of the revolutionary crowd. For example, Marguerite Rigolboche, a cancan dancer who performed in the late 1850s and 1860s (Price, 1998, 34), wrote in her memoirs that, “[o]ne of my friends, a liberal-minded person, declares that the

cancan is also the product of the Revolution. It is, in fact, a free dance above all” (Blum, Huart and Rigolboche, 1860, 69, translation by Stanislaw Bissinger).

Rigolboche understands her friend’s comment in terms of the liberal body that is constructed by both the Revolution and the cancan. For Louis Désiré Véron (1798-1867), director of the Paris Opéra from 1831-1835, however, the revolutionary characteristics (this time the Revolution of 1830) manifested in the cancan body were not liberation but rupture:

The 1830 revolution produced a profound shock and dangerous disturbance throughout society, which was to be even more threatened by the 1848 revolution. After 1830 people’s hearts took a long time to beat at a normal rhythm, their minds settled down but gradually, and they were slow to resume their everyday interests. Inconsiderateness and slovenliness wormed their way into dress, morals and, even, language. Newly-coined words abounded. Schoolchildren and the common people as one indulged in a bizarre, imaginative thrust to transform the way the French danced; out went the gradually developed, rounded and elegant movements of our forefathers, in came a frenetic, convulsive dance, indecent and respecting no-one, which became known appropriately enough as the *chahut* (uproar) and which even gave birth to a new verb *chahuter* (to muck around).

Véron, 1856, 383, original emphasis, translated by Stan Bissinger

Véron’s account of the emergence of the cancan out of revolution draws on a new relationship between the body and history that was being forged in precisely the period with which he is concerned here, around 1830, and had become the dominant paradigm by the time he wrote in 1856. This was the idea that, just as society could be modelled on the grotesque body, so could human history.

Bakhtin (1984) argued that it was the revival of the grotesque in the Renaissance that facilitated the shift from the medieval model of society as a vertical, cosmic hierarchy, to an historical model of society as involved in a continual, horizontal

process of becoming. This shift required a body that was not complete, but in constant transformation through cycles of birth and death, that is, the grotesque body. By the Enlightenment, history had become the primary mode of explanation for physical and cultural human differences, and conversely history was reconceptualised as biological development. However, the imperative to preserve the notion of hierarchy by interpreting history as a linear progression towards rationality, had disguised the grotesque body of history as a body of classical perfectibility. The underlying grotesquerie of history was exposed by Rousseau and the romantics, for whom civilisation was the result not of progression, but of decline, and whose salvation lay in the irrational and the primitive. This challenge to the notion of the inexorable forward progress of humanity, was reinforced by the Revolutions of 1789 and 1830. Although neither revolution resulted in a complete inversion of the power structure, their violence, the collective power demonstrated by those at the bottom of the social scale, and the apparent repetition of the first revolution in the second, ruptured linear accounts of human history<sup>12</sup>. These events seemed to suggest that if history was a biological process, then this should be modelled not on the development of the classical body towards increasing perfection, but on the development of the grotesque body, which is born, grows, matures, declines and dies, in a continuous cycle.

Véron's description of the Revolution of 1830 employs this notion of revolution as a rupture, a "profound shock and dangerous disturbance", to the body of society, affecting people's "hearts" and "minds". The cancan then emerges as a physical symptom of the historical convulsions of the grotesque body of society.



The evolution of the quadrille into the cancan seemed to confirm the grotesque model of human history: if irrationality could emerge from rationality, if the closed, civilised body of the quadrille could be punctured and distorted in the cancan, then society could not be on a straight pathway towards classical perfection. Instead, the grotesque cancan made physically manifest history's bodily irrationality, its resistance to rational comprehension or control, its physical cycles as well as its growth, its capacity for revolution as well as progression. If the classical body had represented the healthy growth of society along rational, orderly lines, the grotesque body of the cancan expressed history's dis-order, its decline, and its pathology.

Furthermore, this biological connection between the cancan and history was no mere metaphor. As Daniel Pick (1989) has shown, in mid-nineteenth century France, history and the body became inextricably intertwined in the theory of degeneration, or *dégénérescence*. Although history and biology had been employed as explanations for each other since the Enlightenment, degeneration provided a universal theory for this interaction. The historical basis of pathology was established by the physician Bénédict Morel (1809-1873), who argued that mental disorder could be inherited across generations. This was followed by the pathologisation of history in Hippolyte Taine's (1828-1893) explanation of the nineteenth-century French revolutions in terms of infectious and hereditary illness. According to Taine, not only could social revolution have pathological repercussions in the bodies of individuals, as Véron suggested in his explanation of the emergence of the cancan, but "the morbid germ which entered the blood of a diseased society [could] cause... fever, delirium and revolutionary

convulsions” (Taine cited in Pick, 1989, 72). The revolutionary potential of the pathological body lay in its ability to infect others with its irrationality; as Taine notes, “[h]e catches the fever from contact with those who are fevered”, resulting in a crowd possessed by “the nervous tremor of the body strained beyond its powers of endurance” (Taine cited in Pick, 1989, 70), what Pick calls a “democracy of the pathological” (Pick, 1989, 70). This crowd is, according to Taine, vulnerable to the whim of powerful leaders, who can drive the frenzied masses into the rupture of revolution: “Centralization and universal [male] suffrage... have impaired [France’s] constitution to the causing of apoplexy and anaemia” (Taine cited in Pick, 1989, 72). The cancan, with its “convulsive” (Véron, 1856, 383) movement and grotesque embodiment of a mass body politic was, therefore, not just a physical symptom of revolution, but potentially its agent.

Gasnault’s (cited in Cordova, 1999, 139) description of the cancan’s transformation of the Paris Opéra balls of the 1830s, suggests that the dance was indeed conceived as a weapon of mass revolt. According to Cordova, social dancing was prohibited at the Paris Opéra balls of the Restoration Monarchy (1815-1830), and as dissatisfaction with the repressions enforced by the Monarchy increased in the late 1820s, so did criticism of the ball. After the Revolution of 1830 censorship was lifted, allowing carnival balls to be held at other venues where social dancing could take place, but the prohibition remained at the Paris Opéra. However, Gasnault reports that on 5<sup>th</sup> January 1833, the crowd, dissatisfied with the ballet performance they were offered as entertainment, stormed the stage, demanding the *chahut*. This led to a “danced

riot” (Cordova, 1999, 139), which pitted the crowd’s demands for corporeal freedom, against the repressive measures of the police, who made several arrests. Although the prohibition was not immediately lifted, mounting pressure led the authorities to capitulate in the late 1830s, on the basis that, in the words of the police prefect, Gabriel Delessert, “when the people are having fun, they are not plotting” (Delessert cited in Cordova, 1999, 289). The cancan was thus intimately associated with revolutionary energies in the 1830s, whether as a form of protest against the restriction of physical freedoms, or as a means of channelling these energies away from revolution itself. The cancan appeared to some as an embodiment of the very principles for which the Revolutions of 1789 and 1830 were fought: liberation, self-determination, the will of the people. For others, however, it represented the forces of mass irrationality that could overthrow the bourgeois hegemony that the Revolution had achieved. The cancan thus performed the contradiction at the heart of bourgeois politics: that the liberatory rhetoric on which their power was based, could also cause their demise.

In the 1840s, the continued embodiment of the spirit of revolution by the cancan coincided with increasing bourgeois fear of the threat posed by the working class to their political supremacy (Magraw, 1983). The Revolution of 1848, resulting in the short-lived Second Republic (1848-1852), represented for the *grande bourgeoisie* the brief victory of the forces of irrationality that would quickly be suppressed in the Second Empire of Louis-Napoléon (1852-1870). The cancan, as the performance of the revolutionary force of irrationality, forged a lasting connection with the workers’ transient triumph. For example, as Clark (2002,

513) observes, in Flaubert's description of the Revolution of 1848 in Sentimental Education, the cancan is evoked as the ultimate performance of revolutionary subversion<sup>13</sup>. After the workers have stormed the king's quarters at the Palais Royale, they toss the throne amongst themselves, eliciting the exclamation: "Good Lord! Look how it's pitching! The ship of state is being tossed on a stormy sea! It's dancing a can-can! It's dancing a can-can!" (Flaubert, 1964, 289), before it is thrown through a window. The Revolution is symbolised not by a cancan performed by the workers, but by their ability to infect the icon of the monarch's bodily power, his throne, with the cancan's revolutionary convulsions. It was precisely the threat to the elite posed by the cancan's revolutionary contagion across boundaries of gender and class that prompted the development of an alternative form of the dance which appeared to defuse its subversive power.

## **2.10: Cancan Spectatorship and the Projection of Embodiment**

In this section, the emergence of a performative mode for the cancan, as opposed to the social dance format through which it initially developed, is conceived as a defensive reaction to the pathological threat of the revolutionary crowd that the dance was thought to generate. The cancan's revolutionary grotesquerie was a source of ambivalence for many bourgeoisie, and particularly bourgeois men. Its performance allowed a liberatory moment of release from the restrictions of the rational body, but the irrational movement that resulted threatened the individual's social and political status. The competing feelings of compulsion and revulsion that this contradiction generated were often attributed to the

cancan's pathology; only an epidemic could explain the indiscriminate possession of so many bodies by irrational movement. Sanderson wrote from Paris during the carnival season of 1836,

There has been raging, the whole of this month, a disease which prevails here, usually about this season of the year – a kind of intermitting fever. It affects the whole city with a violent agitation of limbs, and often drives the features entirely out of the human countenance.... Towards morning they get into a kind of paroxysm – not a galloping consumption, but a *gallopade* – which being over, they recover, and go quietly to bed, and the fit does not return till the next midnight.

Sanderson, 1847, 171, original emphasis

One solution to this problem drew on the method used to preserve the rational body during the Revolution of 1789, and that was first used in relation to dance in romantic ballet: the projection of irrational embodiment onto the other. In the 1840s, the cancan became increasingly associated with female dancers, both in the *guinguettes* and at the public balls. Although certain male cancan stars emerged, such as Chicard and Brididi, their female counterparts rapidly eclipsed their fame (Cordova, 1999). Many women capitalised on the projection of embodiment onto the female form. The most famous *cancaneuses* of the time were women who could profit from the spectacularisation of their bodies. Some, such as Reine Pomaré and Celeste Mogador, were courtesans, who used the cancan to advertise their bodies to potential patrons. Others, such as Finette la Bordelaise, were romantic ballerinas (Price, 1998, 35-36), who were either employed by the Paris Opéra or supplementing their income through prostitution.

These dancers, some of them professionally trained, developed the cancan to maximise its attraction for their target audience, bourgeois and upper class men.

The liberatory aspects of the dance were highlighted, such as freedom of movement, exhibited in ever higher kicks, and in a format for the dance which included female solo improvisation in the final figure, known as the *quadrille naturaliste* (Price, 1998, 33). Emphasis was also placed on its grotesque aspects, which embodied all that had been repressed and excluded from bourgeois life. Following the grotesque “Gallic tradition” of female representation described by Bakhtin, the cancan dancer, “lift[ed] her skirts and show[ed] the parts through which everything passes... and from which everything issues forth” (Bakhtin, 1984, 240-41). In the second half of the nineteenth century, this practice was often replaced by the revelation of underwear, newly standard for women (Price, 1998, 42-43). The performance of the dance by romantic ballerinas also led to an adoption of the balletic fetishisation of female legs. By manipulating their skirts, cancan dancers reproduced the titillating effect of the revelation of legs originally created by the *pirouette* (a turning step which lifted the ballerinas’ skirts), and by the official raising of romantic ballerinas’ skirt lengths by the Opéra authorities.

As in Doane’s (1993) formulation, and as in romantic ballet, the projection of embodiment onto women was accompanied by the denial of male embodiment and the concomitant cultivation of a disembodied spectatorship by bourgeois men. Clark argues that during the July Monarchy (1830-1848), “women of all classes became more visible within the public sphere as dancers, while bourgeois men moved into the position of audience rather than performers” (Clark, 2005, 206). She notes that during the same period, men abandoned masks and social dancing at public balls. Simultaneously, in theatrical dance, male ballet dancers were rejected as “heavy” and “ugly” (anon. cited in Guest, 1980, 21; see also

Burt, 1995). Male bourgeois identity was becoming less performative, generating a movement against the display of the masculine body. A passage written in 1844 by the nineteenth-century German theatre director, Ferdinand von Gall on Parisian salons, suggests that this movement was enforced from above:

The bestial grossness... [of the “chahue”] has lead to the creation of a police ordinance... Men, accordingly, are not allowed to appear at these balls either masked or in costume... Women, on the other hand, are not allowed to appear unless they are masked.  
von Gall cited in Benjamin, 1999a, 492-93

Accordingly, the male cancan dancer, who often performed in the dandy mode as an exhibitionist, became far less common, although men continued to perform the cancan until the 1890s.

From the 1840s onwards, the cancan was increasingly modelled on the relationship between the female performer and the male spectator. By denying their own bodily participation in the dance, and placing “the protective distance of the gaze” (Savigliano, 1995, 99) between performer and spectator, bourgeois men attempted to fortify their rational, moral bodies against infection by the germ of irrationality, while retaining visual access to the liberating grotesquerie of the cancan performed by the female body. The art historian Norman Bryson notes that the restriction of bourgeois women to the domestic realm in the nineteenth century, left, “the urban landscape as a place of encounter between the flâneur who can afford to pay for his pleasures, and those women whose bodies are, or might be, available to cater to them” (Bryson, 1997, 66), and this encounter was increasingly characterised by the relationship between observer and observed. However, Anne Friedberg points out that, “[a]lthough flâneurie

began as a predominantly male perceptual mode it was, by the mid-nineteenth century, available to women – first as shoppers, then as tourists and cinema-goers” (Friedberg, 1993, 184). Just as the possibility of the male cancan dancer persisted in the nineteenth century, so did the possibility of the female cancan spectator, who flouted the heterosexual model of cancan performance. Figure 6 shows a predominantly male, bourgeois audience gathering around the female cancan dancer La Goulue in the Jardin de Paris in 1890. However, Le Goulue is presented to the crowd by her male dancing partner, Valentin le Désossé (Valentin the boneless), and several female spectators can be spotted amongst the male throng.



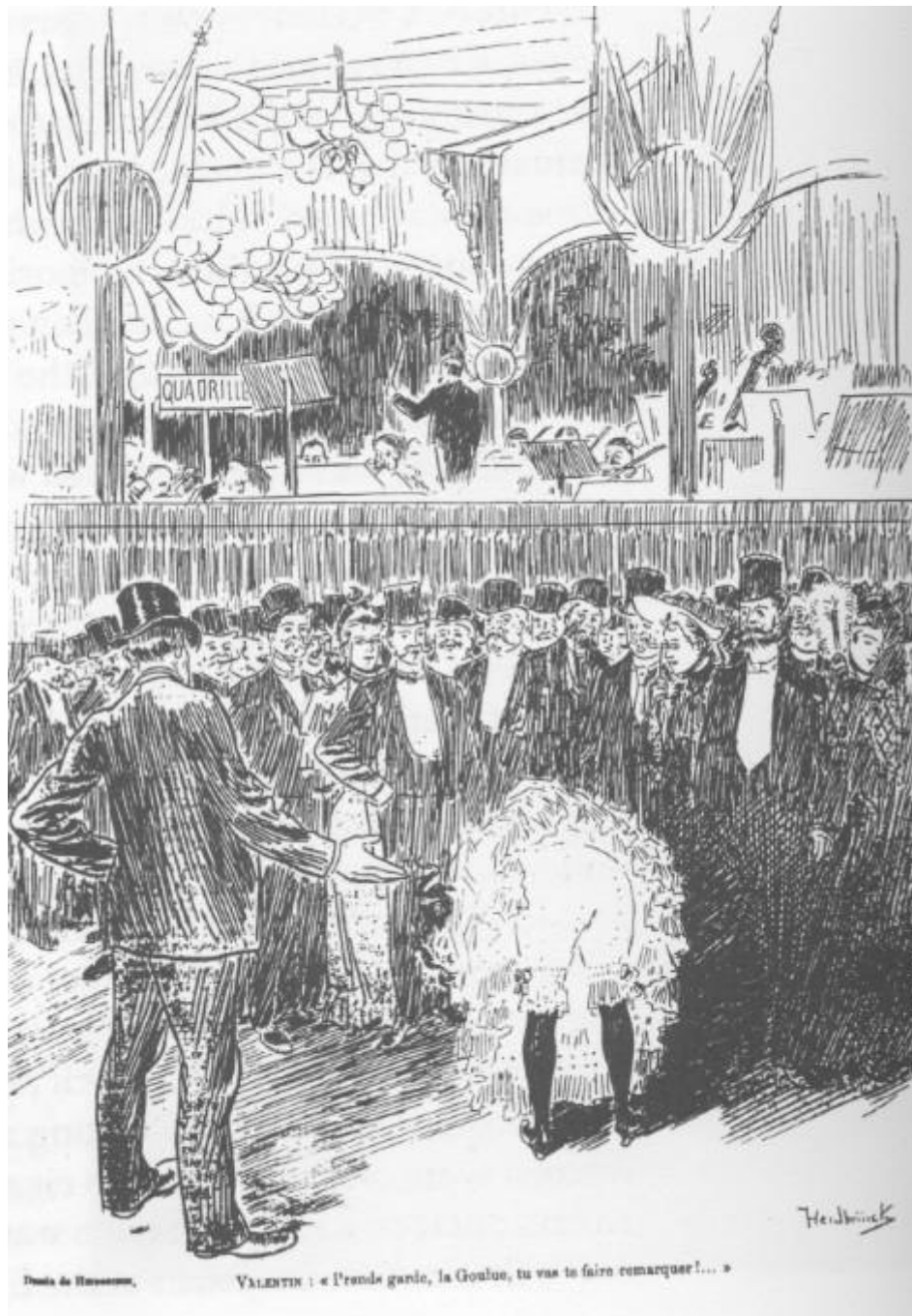


Figure 6: Illustration in *Le Courrier Français*, 29th June 1890. Reproduced in Price (1998, 48)

Gender crossing was permissible at the boundary between cancan performer and spectator. The fear of pathological irrationality crossing this border, however, caused greater anxiety. In the late nineteenth century, increasingly specific diagnoses were made of the type of irrational pathology for which the contagious

convulsions of the cancan were a symptom. These investigations revealed a disease that could be transmitted merely through the act of watching a sufferer, threatening the unassailable rationality of the spectator (Gordon, 2001b). Fears of the spread of irrationality grew as the cancan was increasingly interpreted as a form of hysteria.

### **2.11: The Hysterical Cancan in the Third Republic**

Since the Enlightenment, fear, denial and rejection of the irrational had frequently been justified by accusing the irrational other of madness. Foucault (2001) has argued that, like Bakhtin's grotesque, madness was given social visibility during the Renaissance, but from the mid-seventeenth to the late eighteenth century, the cultivation of reason as the *sine qua non* of subjectivity and society led to the confinement of those considered mad in disciplinary and repressive institutions. In these 'madhouses', madness was treated not as a disease to be cured, but as an expression of animal-like freedom that required rational discipline and punishment. However, in the late eighteenth century, new, medical theories posited a connection between the rational mind and the irrational body that revealed the vulnerability of reason to its opposite. This connection was located in the passions, the control of which was necessary to preserve rationality, as the doctor and botanist, François Boissier de Sauvages de Lacroix (1706-1767), argued in his *Nosologie Méthodique* published in 1772:

The distraction of our mind is the result of our blind surrender to our desires, our incapacity to control or to moderate our passions. Whence these amorous frenzies, these antipathies, these depraved tastes, this melancholy which is caused by grief, these transports wrought in us by denial, these excesses in eating, in drinking, these

indispositions, these corporeal vices which cause madness, the worst of all maladies.

Sauvages cited in Foucault, 2001, 80

Rationality could no longer be protected by confining the irrational bodies of others, as madness was now a latent threat lurking in all bodies. Madness became pathologised as a contagious disease to which everyone was vulnerable, and which could spread through the air.

In the nineteenth century, the notion of pathological madness remained a key aspect of the discourse on the irrational. The threat that the irrational, grotesque body posed to the rational body politic was increasingly expressed as a fear of contagion. The medicalisation of the irrational reflected both the physical nature of the danger it presented, and the belief that this danger could be ameliorated through scientific rationalisation. Madness was divided into identifiable types depending on its symptoms, and the type most associated with the irrationality of the female body was hysteria. Foucault's description of the characteristics associated with hysteria reads like a catalogue of bourgeois fears of the grotesque. Hysteria was conceived as, "the disease of a body indiscriminately penetrable to all the efforts of the spirits" (2001, 139), as opposed to the impenetrable rational body. The hysteric therefore, "suffered from an excessive solidarity with all the beings around one" (148), in contrast to the bourgeois separation of the body from the world. Furthermore, hysteria was, "related to an excessive mobility", particularly "the organic movements of the lower parts of the body" (134 and 148), such as the legs. Hysteria, therefore, pathologised the grotesque body that was performed in the cancan.

Franko argues that “[t]he sources of madness in movement can be traced back to the tradition of Renaissance social dance” (Franko, 1993, 95). Burlesque ballets, he continues, integrated the transgressive aspects of Renaissance dance, such as frenetic or uncontrolled movement, into theatrical performance as representations of madness. He notes that such movement was often intended to portray the madness caused by unrequited love, a connection that re-emerged in nineteenth-century hysteria, which was particularly associated with unmarried virgins. As McCarren (1998) has argued, hysteria became a theme in romantic ballet, particularly *Giselle* (1841). However, the performance of madness through grotesque movement only fully recovered the full embodiment, fascination and danger of its Renaissance form when it returned in the cancan.

Bakhtin argues that comic performers of the grotesque body in the Renaissance drew their physical aesthetic from:

the three main acts in the life of the grotesque body: sexual intercourse, death throes..., and the act of birth. Frequently these three acts are transformed or merged into each other insofar as their exterior symptoms and expressions coincide (spasms, tensions, popping eyes, sweat, convulsions of arms and legs).

Bakhtin, 1984, 353-54

These are precisely the movements that were deemed pathological in hysteria, and from which the cancan derived its physical vocabulary. Contemporary descriptions of the cancan often also employed this language of the grotesque. For example, Edgar Baes described the cancan as, “nothing but a frenetic spasm of a panting gnome and a female ghoul in heat” (Baes cited in Gordon, 2001b, 97), and another commentator, Gustave Coquiot, said of La Goulue, a famous

Moulin Rouge dancer of the 1890s, that, “she dances with jerky movements” (Coquiot, cited in Pessis and Crepineau, 1990, 26). Rae Beth Gordon (2001b) argues that the use of this hysterical language to describe the cancan and other French performance practices, increased dramatically in the 1870s.

Just as the Revolutions of 1789, 1830 and 1848 were seen as historical convulsions of the grotesque body of society, France’s defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, and the Paris Commune of 1871 raised urgent questions about the health of the body politic. Gordon (2001b, 6-7) cites evidence of a sharp rise in hysteria diagnoses in the early 1870s, reaching a peak in the 1890s, and Mark Micale observes that the language of hysteria characterised French social, cultural and political discourse in the same period (Micale cited in Gordon, 2001b, 7). Gordon argues that this final quarter of the nineteenth century saw the emergence of a new mode of physical performance based on the physical repertoire of hysteria, called the epileptic aesthetic (hysteria and epilepsy were synonymous at this time). While the history of the cancan, not to mention Bakhtin’s history of the grotesque body, clearly show that this aesthetic did not appear for the first time in the late nineteenth century as Gordon claims, the growth of hysterical discourse during this time provided a frame through which both the threat and the appeal of the cancan could be reconceptualised in relation to the new historical context of the Third Republic (1871-1940).

Charles Rearick (1988) has summarised this context. He argues that the foundation of the Third Republic in 1871 drew a reaction from conservative, bourgeois moralists, who claimed that the Republic was allowing too many

freedoms. In opposition to these moralists were the republicans, whose anti-clerical, anti-bourgeois and anti-monarchist concerns had led to the formation of the Republic, and whose confidence grew as political liberties increased, and especially when the nation was acknowledged as an established political democracy in 1880. The claims of the republicans were made via a reworking of historical revolutionary rhetoric for the newly liberal, commercial times. For example, the declaration of new rights had historically been a way of signalling the proclamation of a new era. Thus the 1789 ‘Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen’ and the 1848 revolutionary demand for “the right to work”, became rearticulated as “[t]he right to be lazy” first asserted by Paul Lafargue (1842-1911) in 1883 (Rearick, 1988, 32-34). Lafargue was a doctor and Marxist revolutionary, but in the year of Marx’s death, published a pamphlet by this title, which argued for the replacement of the workers’ ‘right to work’ with an anti-capitalist right not to work, advocating a return to a pre-capitalist, ‘primitive’ lifestyle. Sensual and bodily pleasures were promoted as an antidote to the ascetic teachings of the Church and the physically-restrictive morality of bourgeois conservatives. This aspect of the new set of rights was articulated by Georges Chevrier, the editor of the *Revue Indépendante*, in his 1885 call for “the liberty of the body” (Rearick, 1988, 32-33).

The cancan had virtually disappeared in the 1870s (Price, 1998), as the Opéra ball with which it had been associated went into decline and closed in 1874 (Cordova, 1999). However, the revival of the political rhetoric of revolution and liberty which it had always embodied, led to its re-emergence in a new context in the 1880s. The republican reworking of anti-bourgeois sentiment that had

originally been associated with the bohemians of the late 1820s and 1830s, led to the reconstruction of a bohemian culture modelled on that of the July Monarchy. Thus, the working-class *guinguettes* of Montmartre, and new cabarets, such as the Moulin Rouge, established in the same area and designed to capitalise on their appeal, became the centre of an urban nightlife based on liberation via a return to the low and the irrational. The cancan was re-established as its prime attraction, particularly the early *quadrille naturaliste* version, often danced by three women and one man. The name ‘cancan’ was also shunned in favour of the working-class associations of the *chahut* (Price, 1998). However, this was not a working-class rebellion as in the 1830s. Rather, it was an industry fuelled by a political rhetoric and a bourgeois culture centred on the liberation that the irrational offered.

The revived cancan took the exaggeration of the grotesque, irrational, low features of the dance, developed by the female performers of the mid-nineteenth century, to a new level of excess, creating a spectacle of liberation from the rational for which the bourgeoisie would willingly pay. An early reference to this caricatured version can be found in a description of a performance at a masked ball by Anatole Bazoche, a male exhibitionist and mimic, in Edmond and Jules de Goncourt’s novel of 1865, Manette Salomon:

He parodied woman, he parodied love... It was the infernal cancan of Paris, not the cancan of 1830, naïve, brutal, sensual, but the corrupted cancan, the snickering and ironic cancan, the epileptic cancan that spits like a blasphemy of the pleasure of the dance in the blasphemies of all time...

Goncourt and Goncourt cited in Gordon, 2001b, 81

The “infernal” cancan appeared endlessly, and compulsively, to repeat the grotesque body of the earlier version, making it pathological and “epileptic”.

What had been moments of transgression, such the revelation of underwear, were now performed obsessively, and freedom of movement was flaunted to excess in multiple high kicks. The grotesque materiality of the body, denied by the weightless romantic ballerina, was emphasised in the jump splits, prompting a *cancaneuse* of the previous generation, Rose-Pompon, to distinguish the *fin-de-siècle* cancan from the dance of the 1850s, which

was neither jarred nor discontinuous. No capers, no eccentricity. We did not resemble in any way the women in low-cut dresses who today do the splits in order to be admired by the present generation.

Rose-Pompon cited in Cordova, 1999, 306

The hyperbolically grotesque body of the *fin-de-siècle* cancan appeared to answer Chevrier’s call for the liberty of the body, and the language of hysteria expressed its potential as an agent for the spread of a new, revolutionary, liberatory, body politic. For example, Edmond Heuzé linked hysterical seizure, the irrational body, and the political rhetoric of revolution, in his description of his fellow cancan dancer at the Moulin Rouge, La Goulue: “For me she represents excess, seizure of possession, the release of the passions, savagery. She has the blood of a revolutionary” (Heuzé, cited in Pessis and Crepineau, 1990, 26). For bohemians and liberal members of the bourgeoisie, the performance of hysteria in the cancan embodied the irrationalism that lay behind the politics of liberation, but which the dictates of rationalism prevented them from performing themselves.



For conservative sections of the bourgeoisie, however, the contagious freedom of movement embodied in the hysterical cancan made manifest the dangerous seductions of the liberal disease which was infecting not just individuals, but the body of society itself. This fear is implicit in Jules Claretie's (1840-1913) attack on the hysteria of the cancan, made in 1885, the year he became director of the Théâtre Français:

This epilepsy is to dance itself what the hideous couplet shouted from the depths of filthy dives is to song. And it becomes even more atrocious when the epileptic is a female dancer. Out of Woman's charm, this crazed abandon makes a hard-to-qualify unhealthy stamping and bizarre bonelessness that recall the attacks of nervous disease in that period of shaking and convulsions that science itself has named the period of clownism.... What has all this can-can flesh become? In what *concierge loges*, in what corners of the Salpêtrière do these quadrille dancers drag themselves along<sup>14</sup>?

Claretie, cited in Gordon, 2003, 625

For Claretie it is the pathological freedom embodied in the "crazed abandon" of the cancan dancer that leads to the grotesque expression of hysteria on her body. However, for Albert Wolff, the cancan was not just a symptom of this disease, but its cause, and its contagion struck at the heart of rational bourgeois culture; he notes the, "loosening of morals in France and the decay of the family by the dissolving quadrille" (Wolff, cited in Rearick, 1988, 42). If, as Elias (1994) claimed, manners and morality were the making of the closed, civilised body, then the cancan, with its grotesque, open body, appeared to dissolve these moral boundaries, precipitating the degeneration of society as a whole.

## 2.12: The Degenerating Cancan and *Fin-de-Siècle* Fears

By the late nineteenth century, fear of the historical and biological degeneration of French society had reached a crescendo. Evidence for this decline was found in perceived political, social and physical weaknesses: the military defeat in the Franco-Prussian War; the growth of prostitution; the spread of tuberculosis and syphilis (see Mitchell, 1988, 215; Barnes, 1995); falling birthrates (see Nye, 1994); and a series of anarchist bombings in the 1890s, for example. The idea of social degeneration had grown out of the rupture inflicted by the French Revolution, and subsequent revolutions, on Enlightenment theories of human history as a linear process of healthy biological maturation from irrationality to rationality. After the establishment of the Third Republic in 1871, Charles Darwin's evolutionary theories were increasingly invoked as scientific support for the linear account of human history, and as a political model for the rebuilding of France as a secular, scientific, rational republic after the Franco-Prussian War (Clark, 1984). The application of this biological model to social phenomena, for example by Herbert Spencer as well as Darwin himself, known as social evolutionism or social Darwinism, appeared to place the idea of social degeneration on a scientific footing as evolution in reverse. Earlier theories of evolutionary inheritance, such as the influential work of the naturalist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (1744-1829), were also revived and redeployed as explanations of social decline. In particular, Lamarck's theory of the inheritance of acquired characteristics, that is, that changes to an organism's physiology during its lifetime would be passed on to its offspring, was applied to acquired weaknesses, allowing the possibility that the pathologies of the irrational body, such as

hysteria, could decimate a population in a few decades. The search for the sources of this epidemic centred on the irrational bodies excluded from the rational body politic, the lower classes, women and cultural others, whose grotesque bodies were read as an index of their primitive position in the social evolutionary hierarchy.

Sander Gilman (1985) has argued that these pathological bodies coalesced in nineteenth-century stereotypes of social corruption. For example, the perceived grotesquerie of the female body and the black body were fused in the stereotype of the 'Hottentot Venus', Saartjie Baartman. Baartman was a female member of the Khoikhoi tribe, who were named the 'Hottentots' by Dutch colonisers, and who were popularly conceived to be at the bottom of the evolutionary scale. She was brought to Europe in 1810 in order for her body to be exhibited. The focus of public attention was her protruding buttocks, although scientists were equally fascinated by her extended labia, which were not scrutinised until Baartman died in Paris in 1815, and her body was subject to a thorough, published autopsy. According to Gilman, Baartman's enlarged sexual features were read as evidence of the pathological degeneracy of both the black body and the female body. A similar conflation of irrational types was evident in the work of A.J.B. Parent-Duchatalet on the body of the prostitute, published in 1836. Parent-Duchatalet brought together bourgeois fears of the working class and female sexuality in his interpretation of the prostitute's body as symptomatic of a sexually transmittable social malady. Gilman argues that in the later nineteenth century these stereotypes were frequently brought into conjunction, in art and in social analysis, highlighting their similarities. He cites Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909),

the Italian criminologist, who in 1893, drawing on the earlier work of Parent-Duchatelet, likened the prostitute to the Hottentot and to women living in asylums on the basis of their common pathological tendency to lose physical control, resulting in “either madness or unbridled sexuality” (Gilman, 1985, 99).

However, the pathologies of the lower classes, women and cultural others were perhaps brought most closely together in the body of the cancan dancer. The cancan dancer performed an exhibition of the grotesque body associated with the Hottentot Venus, particularly in the revelation of her *derrière*, a move popularised by La Goulue. But cancan dancers shared with prostitutes the use of the grotesque female body to provide a release from the rational, male, bourgeois body, and many offered both services. The degeneracy of the Hottentot and the prostitute were thus combined in the body of the cancan dancer, tainting her with the irrationality of both the racial other and the sexual other<sup>15</sup>. This created an image even more threatening than that of the Hottentot Venus herself, that of the degeneracy of the black body infecting the French woman, and thus igniting the irrationality that lay latent in femininity. This additional danger that the cancan posed in its fusion of the lower class woman and the primitive was expressed by André Chadourne in 1889 in his wish to,

stop those horrifying exhibitions of women found in the worst gutters... these Goulues, these Grilles-d'égout who dance on the French stage the kind of dance steps that are unknown even to the lowest form of savages<sup>16</sup>.

Chadourne cited in Gordon, 2003, 631-32

Lily Grove expresses a similar sentiment in her origin myth of the cancan, originally written in 1895:

About 1830, a stage dancer called Mazarié played the part of a monkey in the Théâtre de la Porte St.-Martin. He invented for the occasion a figure-dance which he called 'chahut,' which surpassed in its extravagance the wildest movements of the Hottentots.

Grove, 1907, 286

Grove highlights the degeneracy of the cancan body by locating its origin in the imitation of a monkey. Such language drew on the popular Darwinian theory that humans descended from apes, a state to which, degenerationists held, the French population was set to return. Grove laments this regression of the classical, rational, bourgeois, French body:

It is highly to be deplored that the spontaneous promptings of the cultured Parisians, the Athenians of to-day, should translate themselves into an imitation of the antics of a dancing monkey, as such performances will conduce to the degeneracy of the art of dancing.

Grove, 1907, 287

The juxtaposition of the rational human and the under-evolved ape in Grove's critique highlights the source of the cancan's degeneracy: its threatening hybridity. The cancan fused bodies which ought to be kept separate, resulting, as the early evolutionary theorist the Comte de Buffon (1707-1799) had argued, in the degenerate (see Young, 1995, 7). Furthermore, from the 1860s until the turn of the century, polygenism, the theory that the different races represented different species, was the dominant scientific theory, implying that the offspring of parents of different races might be degenerate (Young, 1995). The cancan, with its simultaneous embodiment of the Hottentot and the French, working-class woman, was perceived to perform the monstrous results of this miscegenation. For example, Arthur Symons (1865-1945), the Welsh poet, described in his

memoirs of 1890s Paris the cancan dancers in Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's paintings as "deformed monstrosities" and "some abortion of man or monkey" (Symons, 1926, 7). The danger that these hybrid bodies posed to the bourgeois male lay in the fact that their degeneracy could be transmitted not just via inheritance, but via contagion.

Despite the separation between the disembodied male spectator and the embodied female cancan performer, the degenerate hysteria of the cancan was still thought to be capable of infecting the viewer via his gaze, eliciting irrational movement in his otherwise rational body. Baes expressed this fear in his account of the cancan at the Moulin Rouge: "More than one [spectator] sticks his tongue out and twists his arms craving more, hypnotized by the hectic transports of a monstrous and degrading lack of decency" (Baes cited in Gordon, 2001b, 97). Furthermore, the cancan dancer is not conceived as an innocent carrier of this disease. The sexual attractions of her grotesque body were suspected to be a trap for the bourgeois male, aligning her with the *fin-de-siècle* discourse of the *femme fatale*. Bram Dijkstra argues that in bourgeois *fin-de-siècle* painting, for example, the modern woman is represented as,

a nightmare emanation from man's distant, pre-evolutionary past, ready at any moment to use the animal attraction of her physical beauty to waylay the late nineteenth-century male in his quest for spiritual perfection [by]... drag[ing] him back down to her own low level on the evolutionary scale.

Dijkstra cited in Allen, 1991, 228

Thus, the *femme fatale* uses her sexual otherness to infiltrate the boundaries of the disembodied, rational male, and infect him with her irrational primitivity.

This discourse responded to the increased agency and independence asserted by certain, mostly upper-middle-class, women in the *fin de siècle*, which prompted the construction of the bourgeois stereotype of the ‘New Woman’ as a disturbing spectre of the future. In the *femme fatale*, the threat that the New Woman posed was personified and sexualised into a figure of dangerous attraction. Symons employs the notion of the *femme fatale* in his description of the dancing of Jane Avril, whose nickname, *La Mélinite* (*mélinite* is an explosive), indicates her danger:

How well I remember that Promenade in the Moulin-Rouge;  
monstrous, fascinating, perilous, insidious... La Mélinite dances...  
so as to give one the effect of a modern and no less magical Salome.  
Symons, 1926, 8

Salomé, the biblical daughter of Herodias who seduced Herod into executing John the Baptist by dancing for him, was the archetypal *femme fatale*, who inspired many *fin-de-siècle* artworks including Oscar Wilde’s play of the same name which premiered in Paris in 1896. By casting Avril as Salomé, Symons figures the cancan dancer as the capricious agent of degeneration, calculating the downfall of mankind through her irresistible seduction.

The dancer’s control over the power that resided in her seductive body was displayed in the choreography of the *fin-de-siècle* cancan. The *cancaneuse* was not restrained by the set figures of the quadrille, but improvised and choreographed her own moves. Unlike the romantic ballerina, whose skirt lengths were controlled by male authorities, male spectators and male choreographers, the cancan dancer performed the raising and lowering of her

own skirts. This flaunting of physical liberation was often given revolutionary connotations. For example, Marta Savigliano suggests that the high kick which dislodged a spectator's hat, a move invented in the 1840s (Camus, 2001a) but adopted by La Goulue in the 1890s as her signature step, connoted the "symbolic decapitation" (Savigliano, 1995, 106) of the bourgeois male, an interpretation which corresponds with Heuzé's claim that she had "the blood of a revolutionary" (Heuzé, cited in Pessis and Crepineau, 1990, 26). The cancan dancer performed the power of the irrational to invert rational hierarchies and therefore disrupt social order.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the cancan appeared to embody the seductive but violent forces that had transformed French society, through a series of revolutionary convulsions lasting a century, from a monarchy into a republic. Universal male suffrage had been introduced, and women were now asserting their rights<sup>17</sup>. The psychologist Gustave Le Bon (1896) warned that the crowd could throw the otherwise rational individual into a state of extreme irrationality and suggestibility, a state characteristic, he argued, of women and primitives. The image of an undifferentiated mass crowd that the cancan had evoked since the 1830s, threatening to some and utopian to others, appeared to be manifesting itself on a national scale. Intensified by the sense of foreboding that characterised the *fin de siècle*, this situation would force to the surface alternative configurations of the relationship between rationality, irrationality and the female dancing body, that had been brewing since the 1789 Revolution. These radical reconfigurations would emerge on the cancan body during the late



nineteenth century, as described in the next chapter, prefiguring the sweeping changes to the dance that would take place in the twentieth century.

### **2.13: Conclusion**

By placing human biological and cultural differences along a timeline from the primitive to the civilised, the Enlightenment opened up two possibilities for the interpretation of human history: that humanity was involved in an inexorable progression from irrationality to rational perfection, or that rationalisation was merely a phase of human history from which the irrational would re-emerge. The violence and historical rupture of the French Revolution suggested to many the latter, but the status and power of those involved in the construction of post-revolutionary France rested on belief in the former. Thus, irrationality was expunged from the new, political body of France, and projected onto those bodies that did not fit France's rational destiny: women, the lower classes and cultural others. These bodies became charged with the cultural weight of the nation's potential fates. They represented both liberation from the march of rationalisation, and degeneration into a primitive state of enslavement to the passions. These fears and desires became physically manifest in the body of the romantic ballerina, which was contained within the proscenium arch and subject to the surveillance of the audience, while the liberal, egalitarian context of the quadrille demanded bodies that were rational and civilised.

The cancan placed the irrational body constructed in romantic ballet into the liberal context of the quadrille, and therefore performed an alternative, irrational,

body politic. This body was inclusive, democratised and liberatory. However, it also connoted the violence and anarchy of a diseased, regressive society. The bourgeois spectator attempted to negotiate this simultaneous attraction and repulsion by distancing himself from embodiment of the dance, but the hysterical cancan infected his body via his gaze. In the Third Republic the cancan's political potency was revitalised, representing both the liberatory, revolutionary spirit of the new regime, and the dangers of liberalism. The *fin-de-siècle* cancan embodied the monstrous, degenerate offspring of its earlier miscegenations. The bourgeois response to this threat would bring about a reconstruction of the cancan in the new century.

## **Chapter 3: The Ghost in the Dancing Machine**

### **3.1: Introduction**

This chapter addresses one of the ways in which the bourgeois rational body attempted to defend itself against the contagion and seduction of the irrational dancing body in the nineteenth century: by using scientific rhetoric and technology to mechanise the dancer. The self-detachment and objectivity of scientific thinking was the ultimate product of the rationalist separation of the individual body from the world and from its own bodily impulses, through which the bourgeoisie distinguished themselves (Elias, 1994). Science and technology therefore both facilitated and justified their rise to political and cultural power (Burch, 1990, 9). In the Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, this scientific worldview was applied to the European economy, rationalising production, often by combining or replacing human labour with machines. The mechanised, rationalised conception of the human body that this produced, appeared to counter the grotesque, irrational, excessive, pathological body which the cancan performed. Indeed, the rationalisation of the body in the Industrial Revolution was one of the major developments against which the romantic movement reacted, and against which the irrational body was constructed and defined.

However, the irrational body and the mechanised body were not mutually exclusive. From its inception, the promise of mechanisation as a means of ameliorating the body's irrationality, was accompanied by a persistent fear that

an automated body, blindly following its programming, would in fact be even more irrational. This fear was explored both in romantic literature and in dance forms which embodied irrationality, such as romantic ballet and the cancan. Both fictional and real spectators responded to the ambiguous rationality and irrationality of the dancing machine by employing yet another mechanical device; the dancer was placed behind the glass lens of visual technologies, from opera glasses to the cinematograph. It is argued in this chapter that this ‘imaging’ of the dancer epitomised the tension from which the new cultural condition of modernity arose: that while mechanisation appeared to create a body (of the dancer, the spectator, or the nation) that was immune to irrational urgings from outside and from within, it only ever in fact made its suppressed transgressions appear even more illicitly desirable.

### **3.2: A Scientific Eve: the mechanisation of the irrational body**

The idea of the human body as a machine arose out of philosophical and physiological attempts to rationalise understanding of the human body in response to the challenge of science to religious explanations of the world in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. René Descartes’ conception of the body as a “machine that God has created” (Descartes cited in Cohen, 2000, 16), published in 1662, was foundational to this emergent discourse. In 1748 Julien Offray de La Mettrie (1709-1751), a physician and atheist, elaborated this model in his *L’Homme Machine* (1912 [online]), eliminating its religious vestiges by arguing that the human body was purely mechanical, the soul being merely its thinking part. This conception of the body was made manifest in the eighteenth

century in the construction of mechanical automata which imitated human movements and activities, including dancing. Michel Foucault (1991) argues that the mechanisation of the human body made it into an “object and target of power” (Foucault, 1991, 136) by opening it to analysis, and therefore to manipulation. In particular, the evaluation of the body’s movements in terms of the mechanical criteria of economy and efficiency provided a useful critique of irrational movement, and a justification for its control. This section will address the ways in which the subjugation of the body via its mechanisation gained cultural importance in the nineteenth century, drawing examples from both science and literature.

In the nineteenth century, the mechanised body became opposed less to the irrationality of religious belief, and more to the irrationality of degeneration. The Industrial Revolution made the machine into the icon of a new age, and a panacea for the ills of society. In particular, mechanisation offered solutions to the problems of the irrational bodies of workers and women. The challenge was to bring these groups in line with the rational aims of bourgeois society, thereby defusing the threat their otherness posed to the body politic. Mechanisation provided a means of imposing these ideals upon their very bodies.

Anson Rabinbach (1990) argues that Hermann von Helmholtz’s formulation of the law of the conservation of energy in 1847, led to a new conception of the human body as a motor whose productive power could be harnessed like a machine<sup>1</sup>. The subsequent discovery by Rudolf Clausius of the second law of thermodynamics, that “the entropy of the universe tends to a maximum” (1990,

3), made the efficient channelling of the body's energies appear even more urgent. The inevitable dissipation of energy added the weight of physics to the claim that Europe, if not the universe, was in a state of degeneration. If the problem was the body's irrational, inefficient expenditure of energy, then the solution was to rationalise the body's movements, channelling them into productive work. As Rabinbach states,

Science subjected the body's movements and rhythms to detailed laboratory investigation, to new techniques of measurement, and to photographic study, ultimately giving rise to a new discipline: the European science of work.

(Rabinbach, 1990, 6)

The European science of work was a cultural project which aimed to “solve social problems through empirical research and rational principles” (Rabinbach, 1990, 8). In particular, it sought ways to make the movements of the human body economical, both temporally and spatially. It did this by using machines to capture and analyse the movements of the human body, by rationalising the interactions between workers and machines, and by making the movements of workers more machine-like in their efficiency and productivity.

The first work in this area was carried out in France, where defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, combined with declining birthrates, had prompted a fear that fatigue was a specifically national affliction. In the 1870s and 1880s, in parallel with the work being carried out in the United States by Eadweard Muybridge, Etienne-Jules Marey (1830-1904) developed a technique called chronophotography, in which the movement of the body could be broken down into a series of images captured on the same photographic plate in order to

facilitate its analysis<sup>2</sup>. The underlying rhetoric of chronophotography was the use of visual technology to control and contain excessive movement, as Marey reveals in his description of the procedure in 1885:

When the moving body is inaccessible, like a star whose movements one wishes to follow; when the body executes movements in various ways or of such great extension that they cannot be directly inscribed on a piece of paper, photography compensates for mechanical procedures with great ease: it reduces the amplitude of movement, or else it amplifies it to a more suitable scale.

Marey cited in Didi-Huberman, 2003, 32

Therefore, when the body's movement is too fast or slow to be captured, measured or rationalised, chronophotography reduces this excess to visible, rationalisable instants, allowing its scientific examination and, if necessary, recommendations to be made for its improvement. According to Marta Braun (1992), this method of quantifying, and thence correcting unproductive movement, was of great interest to the French state. Marey was asked to assist the Ministry of War in the reform of the military, and the Ministry of Public Education funded the establishment of his laboratory, the *Station Physiologique*. Marey's work therefore had significance no less than the urgent regeneration of the French body politic, and it inspired others to undertake the same scientific mission.

Auguste Villiers de L'Isle-Adam (1838-1889), a Catholic aristocrat who detested the bourgeois notions of science, reason and progress (Adams, 1982), parodied the late nineteenth-century mechanisation of the body in his novel *L'Eve Future*, published in French in 1886, and translated into English as *Tomorrow's Eve* by Robert Martin Adams in 1982. While the European science of work focussed on

rationalising the irrational movements of the worker, Villiers applied the same rhetoric to the irrational movements of the female dancer. The narrative revolves around a fictionalised version of the American inventor Thomas Edison, who builds a mechanised woman to replace the dancer Evelyn Habal, whose seduction of Edison's friend, Edward Anderson, drove him to suicide. Edison's explanation of his motives for this invention to his benefactor, Lord Ewald, emphasises the deliberate and calculated corruption of male rationality performed by dancers such as Habal:

Their malice makes use of the most insidious, most paradoxical, most anti-intellectual devices of seduction in order to stupefy, little by little, a heart which had been pure and unstained till their evil power took command of it.

Villiers, 1982, 111

Edison attributes Habal's hypnotic powers directly to her dancing; degeneration was "[t]he outcome of my friend Anderson's interest in choreography" (1982, 108). This construction of the dancer as *femme fatale* corresponds directly with the threat to the rational bourgeois male spectator perceived in the irrational movement of the *fin-de-siècle* cancan dancer. Edison's response to his friend's fate is scientific: "I became obsessed with the idea of analyzing precisely and in detail the nature of those seductions" (1982, 108). Like Marey, Edison uses photography for this purpose, but unlike Marey, who rejected the application of his inventions for the reanimation of dissected movement, Edison employs "motion picture photography", pre-empting the invention of cinema by almost a decade. Finding that Habal's attractions were in fact an elaborate artifice, Edison is inspired to create a truly artificial woman, without the dangers of the human *femme fatale*:



if the creation of an electro-human being, capable of working a change for the better in the spirit of mortal man, can be reduced to a formula, let us try to obtain from Science an equation for Love. To say no more, it will not have the evil effects which we've shown to be inevitable in the human race.

Villiers, 1982, 123

Therefore, Edison creates Hadaly, “a scientific eve” (1982, 164) or android, whose mechanical body rationalises the threatening irrationality of the female dancer. In particular, her irrational movements are scientifically analysed and regulated:

I've calculated, by breaking them down into their fundamental components, that twenty-seven or twenty-eight different movements at the most suffice to compound an unusually rich personality. Besides, what is a woman who gesticulates too much? An unbearable creature. Accordingly, you will find here none but harmonious and graceful movements, the others being either shocking or useless.

Villiers, 1982, 131

The rationalised movements with which Hadaly is programmed are classical, exuding grace and harmony. Her surface appearance is in fact modelled on the classical features of Ewald's beautiful but selfish girlfriend, Alicia Clary, who is compared to the Greek goddess Venus. However, Hadaly's movements are also functional (not “useless”). Her movements are thus rationalised by a marriage of the classical to the functional, avoiding the “shocking” effects of irrational movement, which Edison ascribes to “spastics and convulsionaries” (1982, 131), as well, presumably, as dancers. Edison's creation of Hadaly represents an attempt to subject the irrational movements of the female dancer to scientific rational control, rendering them useful, classically aesthetic, and harmless to bourgeois men.

Initially Hadaly appears to be entirely subject to Edison's will. Ewald later exclaims of Hadaly, "Never in the bazaars of Baghdad or Cordova was such a slave displayed before the caliphs!" (Villiers, 1982, 205). This corresponds with Foucault's assessment that while the mechanisation and analysis of the body was carried out under the banner of liberation, the micro-level observation and discipline of the body that this involved was in fact an insidious form of enslavement. For example, he claims that eighteenth century mechanical automata, "were not only a way of illustrating an organism, they were also political puppets, small-scale models of power" (Foucault, 1991, 136). In this model, reason has the power to tyrannise the human body through mechanisation, stripping it of its irrationality, and therefore of its subversive potential. However, Villiers' choice of a female automaton for his parody is significant, as it draws on an alternative discourse of the mechanised body that challenged this model throughout the nineteenth century.

### **3.3: The Mechanical Other**

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a counter-discourse on the automaton had emerged, which saw the mechanised body not as a perfectly rationalised being, but as a machine onto which all the irrational characteristics denied to the rational, bourgeois body, were projected. It was therefore associated with the identities excluded from the rational body politic, particularly women and racial others. In this form, the automaton was no longer controlled and rational, but out of rational control. On one hand this was a threat to the

bourgeois attempt to rationalise the world through science and technology. On the other hand, however, it offered the illicit excitement of irrationality within the rational, bourgeois world, freedom within the machine. In the mechanical other, rationality and irrationality coalesced, creating a hybrid creature whose ambiguity was a source of both thrill and risk. This counter-discourse did not replace the notion of the rationalised automaton, but rather accompanied it, resurfacing whenever the rational progression of European civilisation was in question.

The notion that the mechanisation of the body could induce irrational as well as rational behaviour, emerged simultaneously with the reconception of the human body as a machine. La Mettrie noted in his 1748 treatise that,

we catch everything from those with whom we come in contact; their gestures, their accent, etc.; just as the eyelid is instinctively lowered when a blow is foreseen, or (as for the same reason) the body of the spectator mechanically imitates, in spite of himself, all the motions of a good mimic.

La Mettrie, 1912 [online]

This instinctive response to the body of the performer circumvents the regulation of reason, producing movement that is mechanical, but also pathological and out of rational control. La Mettrie pre-empted the implications of mechanisation for spectator/performer relations by at least a century. In the meantime, the theme of irrational, mechanical imitation would be explored in romantic literature, and later, in physiology and the emerging discipline of psychology.

The dangers of the mechanised body first came to public attention as a result of the romantic critique of industrialisation (see Wood, 2001). Romanticism challenged the idea that the inexorable march of progress towards a fully mechanised society necessarily led to increased rationality and freedom. Instead, it projected the irrationality denied by the bourgeois world onto supposedly rational machines. Andreas Huyssen (1986) argues that around the turn of the nineteenth century, mechanical human automata became the subject of a romantic literature which at once demonised them and feminised them. Whereas their mechanised movements had previously represented the rational control of the body, and by extension the body politic, the reconfiguration of automata as out-of-control female bodies during the Industrial Revolution evoked the loss of control of a society in thrall to machines. The most famous of these works was E.T.A. Hoffmann's (1885) 'The Sandman', first published in German in 1815<sup>3</sup>. The central character is Nathanael, who falls in love with a woman called Olimpia, only to find out that she is a mechanical automaton, a revelation that drives him to madness. Olimpia's mechanisation is particularly evident in her movement and dancing:

She is strangely measured in her movements, they all seem as if they were dependent upon some wound-up clock-work. Her playing and singing has the disagreeably perfect, but insensitive time of a singing machine, and her dancing is the same.

Hoffmann, 1885, 211-12

Olimpia's eerily perfect dancing embodies Nathanael's haunting suspicion that the individual is not in rational control of his/her own behaviour, but is subject to the manipulation of unknown forces:

His constant theme was that every man who delusively imagined himself to be free was merely the plaything of the cruel sport of mysterious powers, and it was vain for man to resist them; he must humbly submit to whatever destiny had decreed for him.

Hoffmann, 1885, 196

This pessimistic vision is a romantic elaboration of the bourgeois fear of losing individual, rational control. However, whereas the romantic grotesque body had been borne of the fear of external, pathological sources of irrationality, the automaton embodied the fear that irrationality was part of the body's mechanical construction. If the body was a machine, then perhaps some of its functions were automatic, bypassing rational regulation. For Nathanael, as for La Mettrie's spectator, these reflexes are stimulated by the sight of mechanical movement. The sight of Olympia deprives Nathanael of the power of self-determination: "he felt as if he were suddenly grasped by burning arms and could no longer control himself, - he could not help shouting aloud in his mingled pain and delight, 'Olimpia!'" (Hoffmann, 1885, 207). Ultimately, the realisation that Olympia is an automaton leads to his descent into insanity, his incarceration in a madhouse, and his suicide. The rationalisation of the female body through its mechanisation is revealed to induce its very opposite: contagious irrationality.

Following Helmholtz's reconception of the body as a motor in the mid-nineteenth century, the question of how irrational physical reactions, such as Nathanael's, could be produced by certain mechanical visual stimuli, became subject to scientific rationalisation. Rae Beth Gordon (2001a) demonstrates that Gustav Fechner's quantification of the relationship between stimulus and sensation in 1860, laid the foundations for the notion that perception of

movement in others induces the imitation of this movement in the spectator's body, developed by French exponents of the emerging discipline of psychophysics in the late nineteenth century. This imitation was conceived as an automatic operation of the "internal machinery" (Henry cited in Gordon, 2001a, 520) of the body, uncontrollable by the rational mind. Therefore, although it followed scientific laws, it was considered an irrational pathology to which women, children, nervous men and hysterics were particularly susceptible. Pierre Janet, a psychologist who studied hysteria under Jean-Martin Charcot at the Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris, noted that hysterics often described their symptoms using the words "machines", "automatons" and "mechanical" (Gordon, 2001b, 66), and he and Alfred Binet concluded that corporeal imitation was a symptom of an individual's domination by low bodily instincts that they labelled the unconscious. Although this tendency was exaggerated in hysterics, it was thought to be present in everyone to some degree, and was exacerbated by exposure to certain mechanical stimuli, or to hysterics themselves.

The new discipline of psychology was therefore founded on a terrifying proposition, that irrationality was built into the apparently rational machinery of the body. There was a 'ghost in the machine', to use the British philosopher Gilbert Ryle's phrase<sup>4</sup>. This was the spectre of loss of control over the rational, mechanical world that had been constructed in Europe during Industrialisation. It therefore appeared as an inversion of the social order, drawing on fears founded in the French and Haitian Revolutions. Machines often augmented, replicated or replaced the labour of the lower and/or enslaved classes who fought these revolutions, and in so doing, they became endowed with the revolutionary

potential of the low. In his discussion of the mechanical in dance history, Norman Bryson notes that, “machines are slaves, meant to serve humanity; nevertheless, there is a risk that these slaves might rise up against their masters, take over the environment, and seek to govern on their own” (Bryson, 1997, 74). This fear is explored in Tomorrow’s Eve when Hadaly, the android described by Ewald as “the black monstrosity” (Villiers, 1982, 192), moments later fools Ewald into thinking she is his human girlfriend through her beauty and lifelike appearance, forcing him to later admit that “[h]e had been made the victim of this inanimate mechanism, the dupe of this masterpiece of illusion” (Villiers, 1982, 193). Hadaly’s mechanical enslavement had become his own, reversing the relationship between slave and master<sup>5</sup>.

The human-like irrationality of machines, and the mechanical automatism found to exist in humans, led to an anxiety in the late nineteenth century over the distinction between the two, exemplified by Ewald’s misconception. Ernst Jentsch (1867-?), a doctor and psychologist, wrote in 1906 of the disturbing feeling of uncertainty and fear generated by the life-like machine:

Among all the psychical uncertainties that can become an original cause of the uncanny feeling, there is one in particular that is able to develop a fairly regular, powerful and very general effect: namely, *doubt as to whether an apparently living being is animate and, conversely, doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate* – and more precisely, when this doubt only makes itself felt obscurely in one’s consciousness.

Jentsch, 1996, 11, original emphasis

Amongst several examples, Jentsch considers that, “the life-size automata that perform complicated tasks, blow trumpets, dance, and so forth, very easily give

one a feeling of unease” (1996, 12), and notes that the evocation of this sensation has been used as a narrative device by authors such as Hoffmann. Ewald’s reaction to Hadaly’s revelation of her mechanisation is very much of this order: “A deep shudder shook his frame from head to foot, even before this understanding was able to grasp the thought which had just struck him like a thunderbolt!” (Villiers, 1982, 192). Jentsch attributes this response to a sudden loss of rationality:

The human desire for the intellectual mastery of one’s environment is a strong one. Intellectual certainty provides psychical shelter in the struggle for existence. However it came to be, it signifies a defensive position against the assault of hostile forces, and the lack of such certainty is equivalent to lack of cover in the episodes of that never-ending war of the human and organic world for the sake of which the strongest and most impregnable bastions of science were erected.

Jentsch, 1996, 15

The sense that an inanimate machine is in fact ‘alive’ represents the incursion of irrationality into the rational stronghold of the mind. Not only does the dancing automaton confuse the boundary between the animate and the inanimate, but if the automaton can masquerade as a human, then perhaps the human is no more than a machine.

What made the dissolution of the boundary between animate and inanimate so dangerous, as both Tomorrow’s Eve and ‘The Sandman’ illustrate, was the attraction that the irrational otherness of the machine exerted over the rational mind. The irrational represented everything the rational body had excluded, and therefore everything it desired. This mechanical automatism offered an escape from the restrictions of rationality and bourgeois morality. Ewald experiences



this desire immediately after the true, mechanical identity of his lover is revealed:

The woman represented by this mysterious doll at this side *had never found within herself the power to make him experience the sweet and overpowering instant of passion that had just shaken his soul.*

Villiers, 1982, 194, original emphasis

Hadaly then offers Ewald the joy of a perfect union if he suspends his disbelief, and his reason, and gives himself over to his irrational desire for her to come alive and interact with him as if she were a human being. In such a fusion of man and machine, the line between animate and inanimate blurs, freeing the mind from the restrictions of rationality, but exposing it to charges of madness. This is the dangerous desire against which Jentsch's "impregnable bastions of science were erected", and, indeed, Ewald eventually checks himself and reasserts his rationality: "What man ever supposed this sinister robot would be able to play on my mind with such a collection of paradoxes inscribed on metal plates!" (Villiers, 1982, 201). However, he eventually renounces his reason, and submits to his desire for Hadaly, allowing him to experience both the pleasure and the terror of irrational automatism, and allowing her to become a true cyborg: "Half-goddess, half-woman, a sensual illusion, her beauty irradiated the night" (Villiers, 1982, 204).

While the machine promised to replace human irrationality with certainty, control and rationality, ironically, the more accurately the machine replicated human capabilities, the more it challenged the boundary between the rational and irrational, and the more threatening, and desirable, it became. Dancing, an

artform whose classical rationality, cultivated in the French court ballets, had increasingly been subverted into a performance of irrationality in the nineteenth century, embodied the automaton's position on the cusp of the rational/irrational divide. When the inanimate object danced, whether Hoffmann's Olympia or Jentsch's automaton, it performed its autonomy from rational control, its potential to slip at any moment into the irrational. This act was at once disturbing (uncanny, in Jentsch's terminology), and alluring. Nineteenth century performance played on this powerful ambiguity, often by reversing it: instead of an inanimate object dancing, the dancer performed as if s/he was an inanimate object. In so doing, the performer could harness the power of the automaton to exert the hypnotic pull on the rational spectator's mind that Olympia exerted over Nathanael, and Hadaly exerted over Ewald. The relationship between the rational man and the dancing, mechanical other would become a primary model for spectator/performer relations in the nineteenth century, and would prefigure the techno-entertainments of the twentieth century.

### **3.4: The Dancing Machine<sup>6</sup>**

Romanticism's questioning of machine culture had produced the first literary mechanical other, and it also produced the first theatrical one, the romantic ballerina. Like the irrational automaton, the romantic ballerina's attraction derived from her demonstration of the ease with which a human construction could escape rational control and slip into irrationality. The French court ballets of Louis XIV had embodied the absolute power that the monarch exercised over the body politic; courtiers moved around the central figure of the king like

machine parts around an axle or body parts controlled by the rational mind (see Cohen, 2000). In the romantic *corps de ballet*, however, these mechanised bodies underwent a grotesque transformation involving both the mass reproduction of female bodies (McCarren, 2003, 10), and the erasure of human boundaries. They became semi-human, feminine, mass-mechanised formations which exerted a power of their own that was seductive, and sometimes dangerous, such as the Wilis in *Giselle* (1841).

The alignment of Hoffmann's female automaton with the romantic ballerina was later expressed in the adaptation of 'The Sandman' as the ballet *Coppélia* in 1870. The theme of dolls or puppets which come to life would form the central narrative of several ballets in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including *Die Puppenfee* (The Fairy Doll) (1888) by the Austrian choreographer Joseph Hassreiter, in which, like *Coppélia*, the seductive threat of the mechanical other is portrayed through the femininity of the central doll and the exoticism of the other dolls who are Chinese and Japanese, for example (Jackson, 2001, 40). Two ballets produced for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes also centred on animated automata: *Petrushka* (1911) choreographed by Michel Fokine, and *La Boutique Fantasque* (1919), choreographed by Leonide Massine as an adaptation of *Die Puppenfee*. The latter featured male and female cancan-dancing dolls<sup>7</sup>.

The subversive performance of the dancing automaton was simultaneously developed in the cancan itself. The cancan performed a body out of rational control and open to manipulation by irrational forces. These forces were predominantly read as pathological, however from the romantic period on,

pathology was frequently conceived as contagious automatism. The spasms, tensions and convulsions through which Bakhtin (1984) characterised the grotesque performing body in the last chapter, exhibit the same irrational, uncontrolled, reproductive characteristics as the rhythms of industrialisation described by Bryson:

fragmentation (in bursts, spasms, jerks, pulses); repetition (the first precise repetitions, since the body repeats only approximately); and velocity (the trio of trains, cars and planes).

Bryson, 1997, 72

The body convulsed by disease was also the body at the mercy of its automatic, mechanical instincts. The cancan therefore performed the romantic fear of the runaway machine, whose automatism had become pathological. Théophile Gautier drew on this image in his description of the cancan:

Imagine that one has dreamt up a contredanse entitled The Railway. It starts by imitating those frightful whistles which announce the trains' departures; the rattle of the machines, the clash of the buffers, the shunting back and forth of clanking iron are all perfectly imitated. Then there follows one of those hurried and breathless gallops, beside which the Sabbath's round is a peaceful dance.

Gautier cited in Cordova, 1999, 144

According to John Gage (1973, 393), Gautier, like several other romantics, was horrified by the new prospect of railway travel, which developed in the early 1830s alongside the cancan. What seems to have disturbed Gautier about the railway is the way in which its mechanism appears to bring it to life; in 1877 he described the headlights of the train in Joseph Turner's painting Rain, Steam and Speed (1844), as glass eyes dancing in the darkness (Gautier cited in Gage, 1973,

393). The cancan, with its irrational jerks and spasms, appeared to Gautier to perform this uncanny dance of the machine.

Gordon (2001b; 2001a) argues that the performance of pathological automatism became the central aesthetic of a cabaret and café-concert scene that developed in Paris between 1865 and 1907. These performers drew on the mechanical gestures of hysteria to create acts with literally infectious appeal. Although Gordon only briefly mentions the cancan (several short references in 2001b), it developed the pathological/mechanical style thirty-five years before popular interest in hysteria prompted more widespread use of the epileptic aesthetic by a range of entertainers from 1865 onwards.

According to Gordon, this type of performance sometimes took the form of the imitation of a puppet or marionette, a fragmented mechanical body operated by forces beyond its control. This image was frequently used by performers and spectators of the cancan, both before and after 1865. For example, Céleste Mogador, the Second Empire courtesan and cancan dancer, describes her rehearsal of the new polka-inspired version of the cancan in September 1844, concluding, “[w]e looked like a bunch of telephone signals and marionettes” (Mogador, 2001, 87). Bayle St. John’s (1854) description of the cancan, referenced in the last chapter, is also worth repeating in this context:

Dancing has been transformed into a violent kind of gymnastics, in which genteel young men kick up their legs, wag their heads, distort their bodies, and scatter their arms, elbows, and hands, exactly as if they were puppets hung on wires.

St. John, 1854, 275

Similarly, Flaubert gives the following description of a cancan in his 1869 novel A Sentimental Education: “Deslauriers was clasping his little woman tightly against him and carried away by the mad fury of the cancan was threshing away in the middle of the quadrilles like some giant puppet” (Flaubert, 2000, 78). One of the illustrations provided to supplement James Jackson Jarves’ (1855) account of the cancan (Figure 7) shows a female dancer performing a move outlined by Sarah Davies Cordova in her summary of contemporary cancan descriptions: “they stiffened their entire bodies to look like wooden marionettes” (Cordova, 1999, 203).



**Figure 7: Illustration of the cancan fleuri. Reproduced in Jarves (1855, 181)**

In these examples, the puppet signifies a body whose movements are not coordinated by a central, rational mind, but mechanical responses to the whim of an irrational, uncontrollable force. By the 1880s, this erratic style, and particularly the stiffening of the body, would be identified with the pathological automatisms of hysteria (see previous chapter), and perhaps by the 1890s, with the newly discovered, mysterious, capricious workings of the unconscious. These

physiological and psychological explanations were attempts to rationalise the phenomenon of irrational movement.

The appeal and threat of the image of the dancer reacting automatically to unconscious impulses, was the awakening of similar mechanical, instinctive, irrational urges in the spectator. Edgar Baes' account of the cancan at the Moulin Rouge, cited in the previous chapter, can now be read in a different light: "More than one [spectator] sticks his tongue out and twists his arms craving more, hypnotized by the hectic transports of a monstrous and degrading lack of decency" (Baes cited in Gordon, 2001b, 97). The apparently automatic gestures of the dancers mesmerise the spectator, depriving him of the conscious will to resist mindless imitation of the mechanical movements before him.

Gordon argues that this surrender of rational control to mechanical compulsion became the primary model for cabaret spectatorship in the late nineteenth century, coinciding with an increase in cases of, and popular interest in, hysteria. However, the mind-numbing effects of the mechanisation of the body had been a source of anxiety since La Mettrie's description of the spectator who mechanically imitates the motions of the mimic, in spite of himself. From La Mettrie through Charcot's study of hysterics to the psychologists of the 1890s, the mode of defence against the threat of contagious automatism was the same: to subject the mechanised body to a scientific gaze. The scientific gaze was vision augmented by technology; in its simplest form, the glass lens.

### **3.5: Through the lens: the mediation of visual technologies**

Although the lens was not a new invention, in the nineteenth century visual technologies developed rapidly, allowing a new technological mode of spectatorship to emerge. The lens promised to form a transparent barrier between the mechanical body and the observer, allowing visual investigation while maintaining rational separation between subject and object. However, it was soon discovered that the mechanisation of the gaze contained the same ambiguity as the mechanisation of the body: it could reduce irrationality, but it could also multiply it. This paradox was dangerous but powerful, and would later be harnessed for both commercial and political purposes. In this section, the use of the lens as a device for mediating between the mechanical body and the observer will be explored through examples from literature and dance spectatorship, before arguing that this function was extended through the development of new visual technologies during the century.

The dual effect of visual technologies on the relationship between the spectator and the dancing machine is illustrated in Tomorrow's Eve. When the completed Hadaly is first presented to Ewald, a subtle detail of his reaction appears insignificant: "Mechanically he adjusted his monocle and looked her up and down, from head to toe, from both sides, and then directly face to face" (Villiers, 1982, 193). Ewald surveys Hadaly with a systematic, analytical, apparently objective gaze through a glass lens. Hadaly's ensuing monologue, in which she implores Ewald to ignore his rationality and submit to his irrational desire for her to exist, is broken by the following exclamation: "Oh, what absurd clothing



we're wearing! Why do you put that bit of glass in your eye? Don't you see perfectly well, even without its help?" (Villiers, 1982, 200). It is now clear that Ewald's monocled gaze is no mere descriptive detail, but the mechanism of Hadaly's objectification and rationalisation. As if by confirmation, Ewald's subsequent rejection of Hadaly's appeals to his irrational desires, and reassertion of his rationality, is followed by the statement that, "having adjusted his monocle, Lord Ewald lit a confident cigar" (Villiers, 1982, 201).

Ewald's monocle serves two functions. In the first instance it allows him unrestrained, voyeuristic access to Hadaly's mechanised female body. At this point Ewald has just discovered that that woman to whom he has declared his love is in fact Hadaly, an exact, but mechanical, copy of his girlfriend Alicia. Therefore, this gaze is one that attempts to reconcile the irrational attractions of Alicia's body with the knowledge of its mechanisation. However, after Hadaly tempts Ewald to leave behind his rationality, and his monocle, it becomes an embodiment of the defensive wall of rational argument with which he dismisses her pleas. In the accompanying speech, he associates this rejection of the irrational with the exposure of performance as a seductive illusion: "But I was forgetting; this is a theatre, I'm watching a stage show!" (Villiers, 1982, 201). The second, rationalising use of the monocle is to protect the spectator from the mesmerising attraction of the performer.

In bringing these two functions together, the glass lens of the monocle allows Ewald to gain closer access to the irrational attractions of the female automaton, while still maintaining the physical boundary between bodies that rationality

demands. This mediating property of the glass lens is a recurring theme in both romantic literature and popular dance spectatorship in the nineteenth century. It is, for example, central to the interaction between Nathanael and the automaton Olimpia in Hoffmann's 'The Sandman'. However, whereas Ewald's use of his monocle tends toward the rationalising side of the mediation, Nathanael's use of his eyeglass tends to increase his vulnerability to the irrational.

Nathanael's childhood fears of his father's friend Coppelius are reawakened in his adulthood by a "weather-glass hawker" named Guiseppe Coppola (a "weather-glass" is a barometer). Despite his suspicions, Nathanael is persuaded to buy an eyeglass (which Hoffmann refers to as a "perspective" or simply a "glass") from Coppola. He is first attracted to the glass for its rationalising qualities: "Never before in his life had he had a glass in his hands that brought out things so clearly and sharply and distinctly" (Hoffmann, 1885, 204). However, the appeal of rationalisation is quickly replaced by the capacity of the glass to intensify his irrational attraction to the female automaton Olimpia:

Now he saw for the first time the regular and exquisite beauty of her features. The eyes, however, seemed to him to have a singular look of fixity and lifelessness. But as he continued to look closer and more carefully through the glass he fancied a light like humid moonbeams came into them. It seemed as if their power of vision was now being enkindled; their glances shone with ever-increasing vivacity. Nathanael remained standing at the window as if glued to the spot by a wizard's spell, his gaze riveted unchangeably upon the divinely beautiful Olimpia.

Hoffmann, 1885, 204

The glass renders Nathanael unable to resist the lure of Olimpia's spellbinding automatism, compelling him by its ability to depict the object of his attractions

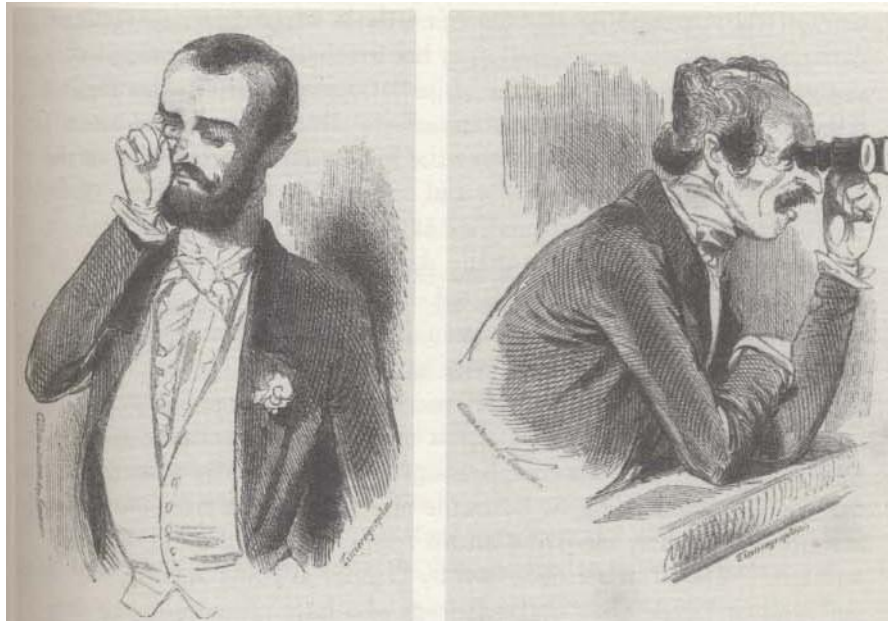
more clearly, but ultimately overriding his reason and driving him to irrational acts. It is his training of the glass on his human love, Clara, who he had previously accused of being an automaton, that motivates her attempted murder and his suicide:

“Oh! Do look at that strange little grey bush, it looks as if it were actually walking towards us,” said Clara. Mechanically he put his hand into his sidepocket; he found Coppola’s perspective and looked for the bush; Clara stood in front of the glass. Then a convulsive thrill shot through his pulse and veins; pale as a corpse, he fixed his staring eyes upon her; but soon they began to roll, and a fiery current flashed and sparkled in them, and he yelled fearfully, like a hunted animal.

Hoffmann, 1885, 220

The imposition of the glass lens between Nathanael and Clara’s allegedly mechanical body, induces irrational, convulsive symptoms in Nathanael, and brings about his degeneration to the level of animal instinct. In both Tomorrow’s Eve and ‘The Sandman’, the glass lens opens up two possibilities: the reinforcement of rationality, and the intensification of irrationality. Ewald’s narrative moves towards the former, while Nathanael’s results ultimately in the latter.

This double function of the glass lens was not merely a fictional device, but was also employed as a means of mediating the relationship between bourgeois spectators and the real-life irrational, mechanised, female bodies of dancers. Felicia McCarren (1998) demonstrates that the dandy of the 1830s and 1840s sought to gain closer access to the mass spectacle of romantic ballerinas’ legs, by the use of opera glasses (Figure 8).



**Figure 8: Dandies observe the legs of romantic ballerinas through opera glasses.**

**Reproduced in McCarren (1998, 77)**

The gaze facilitated by opera glasses combined scientific investigation with voyeurism. An English balletomane revealed in 1843 that, “we white-waist-coat, pantaloons, and double-opera ourselves up to the hilt... so that nothing may interrupt our study and deep contemplation of the ‘new gal’s legs’” (Anon. cited in McCarren, 1998, 83). Opera glasses provided a veneer of rationality for the visual consumption of the irrational.

From the 1830s onwards, a series of new visual technologies were invented which utilised the capacity of the glass lens to mediate between the rational observer and the world. The first was the photographic process, different versions of which were invented in the late 1830s by Louis Daguerre (1787-1851) and William Fox Talbot (1800-1877). Another was the stereoscope, which developed out of research on vision in the 1820s and 1830s (Crary, 1990), and

which allowed the viewing of two images of the same object taken at slightly different angles, so that the image appeared three-dimensional. Jonathan Crary (1990) argues that these technologies offered the viewer an increasingly vivid sense of the reality, proximity and tangibility of objects and scenes that were not in fact present. However, these images were always mediated; as Crary states, “[e]ven though they provide access to “the real”, they make no claim that the real is anything other than a mechanical production” (Crary, 1990, 132). On one hand their mediation, their separation from and mobility with respect to the real, allows their proximity to the viewer. On the other hand their mediation places a finite limit on the sense of reality that can be achieved. These technologies therefore offered the irrational dissolution of the boundaries between the observer and the world, while ultimately maintaining rational separation. In Walter Benjamin’s terms, they satisfied both the “desire of contemporary masses to bring things ‘closer’ spatially and humanly” and the “desire of the contemporary masses to overcome the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction” (Benjamin, 1973b, 216). They therefore responded to both aspects of the contradictory bourgeois fear of and fascination with the irrational.

The mediating properties of these new visual technologies were applied to a variety of irrational subjects. Images of nude women were popular subjects for stereoscope views (Crary, 1990; Nead, 2005), as well as for *cartes de visite*, which allowed the observer to enjoy a mediated image without the necessity of using a visual device themselves<sup>8</sup>. Cancan dancers were also popular photographic subjects, although before the invention of chronophotography, the long exposure time meant that the dancers had to be photographed in static poses.

Through the lens (literally, in the case of the stereoscope, or vicariously, in the case of the photograph), the irrational female body could be accessed at close quarters while maintaining a barrier against its threat of contagion. Visual technologies therefore facilitated a safe voyeurism that had wide appeal, particularly to the male bourgeoisie.

Furthermore, the capacity of visual technologies to wrest the image of the irrational body from the body itself, enabling its mass reproduction, circulation and exchange (see Crary, 1990, 14; Gunning, 1995b, 18), meant that its seductive powers could be harnessed for other purposes. One of these purposes was financial gain. An alluring image could be used to induce the spectator either to buy the image itself, or to buy another product which the image advertised. Moreover, the reproduced image could carry out this hypnosis of the consumer on a mass scale. Visual technologies allowed the mechanical otherness of the dancer to be yoked to a much larger mechanism: the commercial machine.

Not all inventors of visual technologies shared this vision of a commercial fate for the image. Marey, for example, resisted the adaptation of his chronophotographic technique for the potentially lucrative, but scientifically redundant project of reanimating captured movement into moving pictures (Braun, 1992). Others, such as Marey's assistant, Georges Demy (1850-1918), could see the potential for irrational attraction within the rationalising machine. Demy experimented with the unscientific but compelling attractions of the mechanical image of the female dancing body in his chronophotographs of Paris Opéra ballerinas taken in 1892-93, and two cancan dancers taken in 1893-94

(Guido, 2006). Furthermore, he had begun to investigate the possibility of reanimating chronophotographs to make 'living portraits' that could be sold commercially. Such a technology would render the irrational subject with even greater reality and tangibility, while still interposing the rational glass lens between performer and spectator. However, Marey, unimpressed by Demeny's divergence from scientific investigation, asked him to resign in July 1893. Undeterred, Demeny continued to pursue the idea of living portraits, but Auguste and Louis Lumière beat him to the idea of mass consumption of moving pictures via projection, by staging the first cinema screening in December 1895 in Paris (Braun, 1992).

The split between Marey and Demeny occurred along the blurry line between two different conceptions of visual technologies: as scientific devices which rationalise and control the mechanical body, or as commercial devices through which the irrational attractions of the mechanical body can be intensified, harnessed and reproduced. The visual technologies of the nineteenth century generally began life as the former, but increasingly tended towards the latter, particularly after 1851<sup>9</sup>. An early film of Marey, shot by his assistant Lucien Bull (1876-1972) and described by McCarren (2003, 30-31), suggests that he begrudgingly recognised this shift, and associated it with the rise of the mechanically mesmeric cancan. The film, according to McCarren, shows Marey greeting members of the audience after a lecture, and then, as a finale, imitating a cancan kick. This ironic move suggests Marey's comprehension that while film was borne of rational science, its destiny was as an irrational attraction. In order

to be a suitable subject for the film camera, Marey transforms himself from a scientist into a cancan dancer.

The development that Marey parodied was not just technological, but had deep cultural ramifications. The technique of using an image to create a mass-mechanised, automatic response proved to be so powerful that it transformed Euro-American industry and politics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These changes produced an interlocking of rational and irrational forces that came to define modernity. The mass-produced image, in which technology facilitates the pathological spread of the irrational, became an icon for this new cultural alignment. The following two sections focus on the use of the image of the mechanical, irrational cancan dancer for commercial purposes at the Moulin Rouge, and for political purposes in the Third Republic.

### **3.6: Mass-producing the cancan dancer at the Moulin Rouge**

The capture of the irrational female body through the glass lens of the photographic camera, creating an image that was at once rational and alluring, established a model for harnessing the seductive power of the dancer for commercial purposes in the late nineteenth century. An important medium for this process was the mass-produced poster, ubiquitous in *fin-de-siècle* Paris. The link between mass production of the irrational in posters, and that facilitated by visual technologies, was made in 1896 by the journalist and social critic Maurice Talmeyr: “the inescapable result of that mobile and degenerate art [of the poster] is... a particular, mechanical form of demoralization, as if [it were effected]



through the series of images of the cinematographer” (Talmeyr cited in Verhagen, 1995, 116). For Talmeyr, the poster, like the film camera, mass produces the irrational, contributing to degeneration. However, the pathological spread of enslavement to the irrational was precisely the process upon which the incipient industry of modern mass marketing was based. While Talmeyr feared the effects of irrational imagery on bourgeois morality, the artist Georges Seurat expressed the converse fear, that mass production would mediate, and therefore extinguish, the irrational attraction of the original spectacle, in this case, the cancan dancer. In so doing, Seurat pre-empts critiques of mass production that would become widespread in the 1920s and 1930s. This section focuses on the mass production of the image of the cancan dancer at the Moulin Rouge in the 1890s.

Howard Lay (2001) argues that the success of the Moulin Rouge cabaret in the 1890s derived precisely from mass marketing the irrational. This can be seen clearly in the cabaret’s use of publicity posters. Jules Chéret was commissioned to design the posters for the opening of the Moulin Rouge in 1889, but its most famous poster was designed by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864-1901) in 1891 (Figure 9). Whereas Chéret had populated his poster with beautiful but generic women known as ‘*chérettes*’, Toulouse-Lautrec used the image of the cancan dancer La Goulue to generate his poster’s appeal. La Goulue’s image, frozen mid-kick, is headed and overlaid with promotional lettering. She is framed by, and juxtaposed with, silhouetted spectators, whose faceless forms indicate that they are the observers rather than the objects of the gaze. Even her male dance partner, Valentin le Désossé, is shrouded in shadow. La Goulue, by contrast, is bathed in light. On the right, a splash of yellow mirrors the yellow of the electric

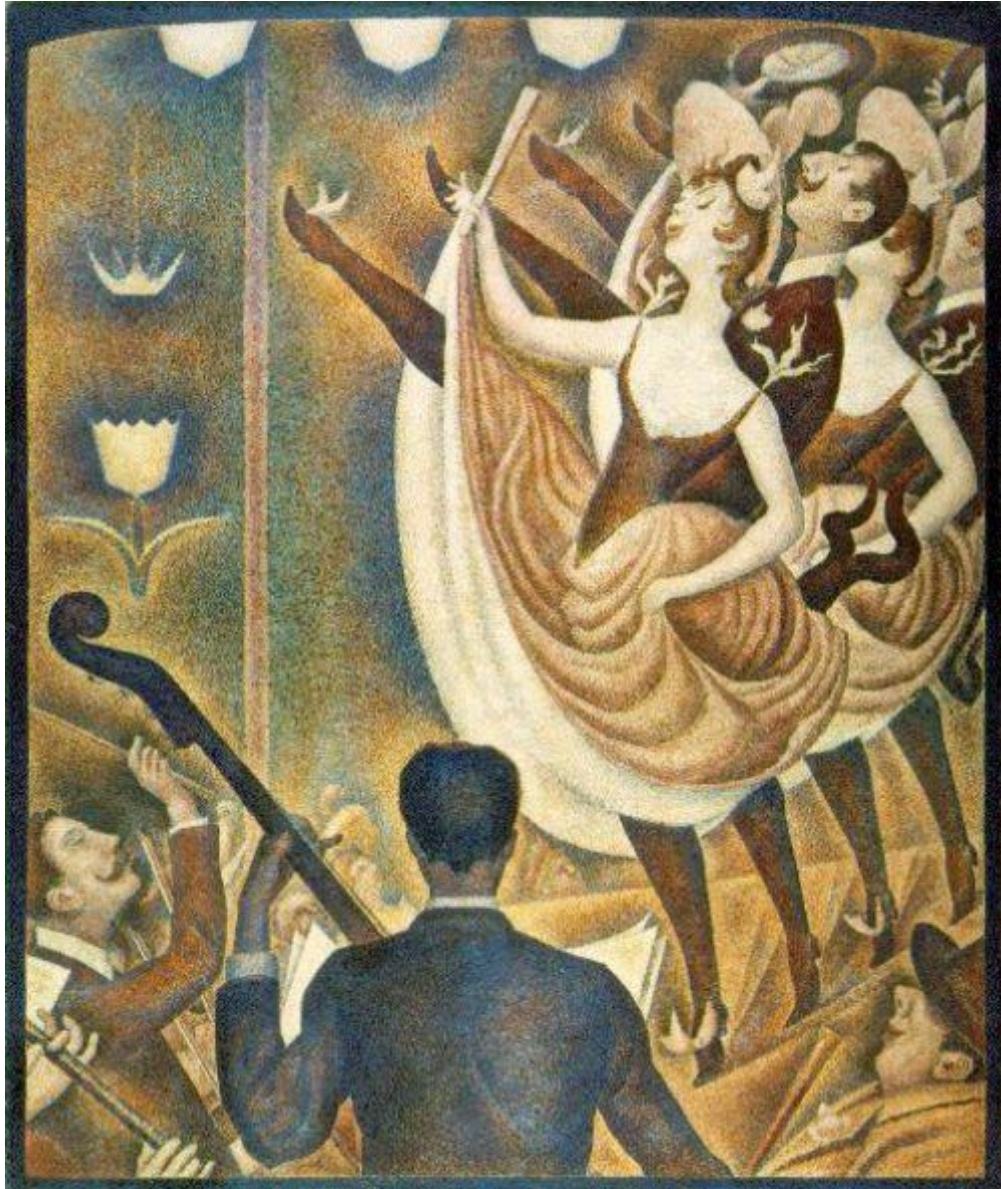
lights hovering in the distance, evoking the bleaching effect of bright light on a photographic print. Like Lorrain's description of La Goulue as, "a gutter bloom caught in the beam of an electric light" (Lorrain cited in Julian, 1977, 100-01), she is illuminated by its artificial glare, and captured by the photographer's/artist's appropriating eye. Mechanically reproduced thousands of times, her image powered the commercial machine of the Moulin Rouge in the 1891 season.



Figure 9: Moulin Rouge: La Goulue by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1891)

Lay contends that the mass production of the irrational in the Moulin Rouge publicity campaign mirrored its nightly reproduction of the cancan as entertainment. The cancan, he argues, was transformed from a performance of subversion and dissent into a reproducible product, whose selling point was its irrationality. The Moulin Rouge was conceived by its manager, Charles Zidler, as a cabaret, “in which the venal woman would be queen, a sort of luxurious slave

market, the difference being that these unpaid slaves would be the classiest  
broad's around" (Zidler cited in Lay, 2001, 164-66). Zidler planned to sell  
irrational female bodies enslaved to the commercial machine of the Moulin  
Rouge. Toulouse-Lautrec's appropriation and mass production of the cancan  
dancer's image fuelled this process. However, a contemporary image by another  
member of Paris's artistic bohemia, opens this mechanical operation to scrutiny:  
Georges Seurat's Chahut (Figure 10), painted in the autumn and winter of 1889-  
90, after the Moulin Rouge had opened in October.



**Figure 10: Chahut by Georges-Pierre Seurat (1889-90)**

Seurat's cancan dancers kick with mechanical precision, their bodies overlapped to give the impression of a single, segmented machine. The conductor appears to control them with his regulating baton, and the mirroring of leg with double bass suggests the appropriation of the cancan as an instrument in a wider scheme. The double bassist, playing his leg-like instrument according to his score, stands between the viewer and the spectacle, converting its immediacy into a pre-

meditated performance. Furthermore, the depthlessness, repetition and geometrical composition of the painting, alert the viewer, as Lay notes, to “the presence of a mediating agency, of a form of production or packaging, operating somewhere amid the tiny dots of color and the performance they presumably represent” (Lay, 2001, 169). In fact, according to Braun (1992) *Chahut* was influenced by Seurat’s familiarity with Marey’s chronophotographs (for example, Figure 11), and therefore perhaps the mediator that Seurat had in mind was the chronophotographic camera. Through Marey’s assistant, Demeny, chronophotography had been applied to the emerging discipline of physical education, which aimed to strengthen the degenerate French physical and social body (Braun, 1992). Like Marey’s chronophotographs, *Chahut* shows bodies perfected and replicated by the mechanical eye of the camera, their irrationality disciplined by its calculating gaze.





**Study of an exercise for developing  
the abdominal muscles.**

**Figure 11: Chronophotograph by Marey, published in ‘The Human Body in Action’,  
Scientific American, 1914 (anon., no date-c [online])**

Seurat was also influenced by new scientific approaches to perception, from which he developed his Pointillist technique, used in *Chahut*. Just as a closer inspection of Seurat’s Pointillist paintings reveals their mechanism, a mass of coloured dots which give the illusion of whole forms when viewed from a distance, Marey’s chronophotographs reveal the constituent phases of movement. However, whereas a distanced view of *Chahut* allows the reconstruction of dots into forms, its movement remains frozen, leaving its mechanism open to inspection, and begging the question of the purpose for which the painting’s, and the cancan’s, illusions are constructed. This implies a critique of the mechanisation of the female dancing body that Ewald gives voice to in *Tomorrow’s Eve*:

But... to hear exactly the same words for ever and ever? To see them always accompanied by the same expression, even though its an admirable one? I'm afraid this comedy will very quickly come to seem... monotonous to me.

Villiers, 1982, 135

For Ewald, as for Seurat, mechanisation drains the female dancing body of its irrationality, and therefore of its appeal. Seurat and Villiers articulate a critique of mass production that has its roots in the romantic attack on machine culture, and that would reach a crescendo in the 1920s and 1930s, particularly in the critique of the culture industry by the Frankfurt School (Adorno, 1991).

Bryson goes so far as to apply this critique of mass production to the 1890s cancan itself, calling it, “entirely impersonal, dehumanised, and repetitious” (Bryson, 1997, 69). However, he makes the mistake of reading the cancan directly through Seurat’s portrayal of it. Although harnessed to an economy of pleasure, the *fin-de-siècle* cancan traded on its ability to walk the tightrope between control and madness, repetition and spontaneity, the rational and the irrational. Lay writes, regarding the Moulin Rouge:

The implicit tension between... the complex mandates of commercial promotion and the mnemonic residuum of disorder, transgression, and social inversion associated with popular culture – is what animated the entire operation.

Lay, 2001, 170

Rationalisation certainly had the cancan within its grasp, but regimentation would not fully infiltrate its body until the 1920s, creating the uniform, ‘precision kick-line’ that Seurat pre-empts. *Chahut*, like Marey’s chronophotographs, offered the viewer a glimpse of mechanical forces that were



as yet imperceptible to the human eye, but which would shortly inscribe their power on the twentieth-century cancan body. It provided a view of the cancan not as it was performed at the Moulin Rouge, but as if captured by the camera lens and appropriated by the image-maker, in this case Seurat himself. This process would not fully engulf the live cancan until the invention of film, and even then, the mechanical other would not stop dancing.

### **3.7: The French Cancan: Harnessed to the nationalist machine**

According to Lay (2001), the publicity campaign that preceded the opening of the Moulin Rouge in October 1889, was designed to attract the crowds drawn to Paris for the Exposition of 1889, which had begun in May and was due to finish a month after the cabaret's opening night. The Exposition made visibly manifest the French government's attempt to use colonialism to regenerate the nation's morale and economy after its defeat in the Franco-Prussian war in 1871 (see Brunschwig, 1966; Bui, 2005 [online]). The Moulin Rouge sought to appropriate and capitalise on the Exposition's profitable combination of colonial spectacle and nationalist display, and the cancan was pivotal within this scheme. Whereas the cancan had previously functioned as France's 'internal other', representing the threat of revolutionary, irrational, and bohemian energies to the French body politic, these elements now became incorporated into a newly constructed national culture of liberal gaiety, which the cancan symbolised (see Rearick, 1988). Just as the pathological spread of enslavement to the irrational was employed as a marketing model in the *fin de siècle*, the capacity of the irrational to dissolve boundaries between individual bodies and fuse them into a mass

crowd, was harnessed by the machine of nationalist politics. In this process, the cancan came to embody the surrender of individuality to national identity. This rendered it comparable with the dance forms of other cultures, such as the belly dance, which were assumed to embody their national character. The Moulin Rouge sold these embodied national spectacles, and its market, like that of the Exposition, was increasingly touristic.

The Second Empire (1852-1870) *cancaneuse*, Rigolboche, was one of the first to recognise that the cancan's performance of a grotesque body politic could become the symbol for a new, liberal nationalism:

Scholars specialising in etymology have claimed that the cancan derived from negro dancing. This is a mistake. Negroes make hand movements, but they do not cancan. The cancan is an essentially French step and it will end up as the national dance of the country.  
Blum, Huart and Rigolboche, 1860, 68-69

Rigolboche's prediction was to come true after defeat in the Franco-Prussian war and the Paris Commune led to the establishment of the Third Republic (1871-1940). The Third Republic was founded on a shift away from the class concerns that had defined French politics since the Revolution, towards the cultivation of cross-class alliances (Magraw, 1983, 209). The cancan had been a weapon in the working-class protest against class inequality, and its grotesque body had always attracted and encompassed a non-class-specific crowd. Whereas this liberal stance had opposed mainstream bourgeois politics for the majority of the century, in the Third Republic it was gradually appropriated by the bourgeois elites as a way to legitimise their position and unify support (Magraw, 1983). The cancan came to symbolise a new French nationhood in which the French Revolution was

celebrated as a source of national unity rather than class division (see Nora, 1998, ix). The physical convulsions of the cancan, previously rejected as symptomatic of France's violent battle with the forces of irrationality since the Revolution, were accepted into the French body politic.

France's new unified identity bolstered itself internally and asserted itself internationally by a show of colonial might. According to Roger Magraw, "[b]etween 1880 and 1895 the French colonial empire grew from one million to 9.5 million square kilometres" (1983, 235). The cancan's shift towards the centre of French identity left the margins free to be occupied by a host of new, colonial others, whose difference would be defined against the cancan's Republican liberalism. The journalist Marcel Lami expressed this new dynamic in 1903:

You can be sure that at this very moment, heroic...explorers, feverish and tired, deep in the darkness of Africa and among the grimacing blacks, see in their dreams, rising on the infested swamps the lights and gracefulness of the Moulin-Rouge. And these strong men find in these trivialities an influx of courage.... The raised skirts contribute a little, just a little, to discoveries a little more important than the revelation of pretty legs

Lami cited in Gordon, 2003, 618

The tamed irrationality of the Moulin Rouge cancan dancers, Lami implies, inspired the conquest of new irrational bodies. Late nineteenth-century French colonialism was conceived as a "civilising mission" (Magraw, 1983, 237), an extension of the rationalising process through which the bourgeoisie had risen to power. However, underlying this rhetoric was the desire to strengthen a French body politic severely wounded by the Franco-Prussian war (Brunschwig, 1966). Having harnessed the irrationality of the cancan dancer, for both commercial and

nationalist purposes, the French government now sought to harness the virile energies of the colonial other to the machine of national regeneration. Magraw cites several late nineteenth-century French writers for whom the colonies were, “a school of national energy, oxygen for a stifled metropolis” (Magraw, 1983, 239). They were to fuel France’s economy, and cure the degenerative disease of ‘overcivilisation’, restoring her to the strength and rationality of an industrial world power.

At the Exposition of 1889, the relationship between colonialism and the regeneration of French industry was put on display. Colonial exhibitions, such as the *Rue du Caire*, a reconstructed Cairo street in which numerous Oriental dancers performed, stood in the shadow of the new Eiffel Tower, constructed specially for the event. At the other end of the Champ de Mars stood the huge Palace of Machines, a feat of engineering in itself, which contained exhibits on the latest techniques and inventions at every level of French industry from artisan crafts to electricity and the railways (Bui, 2005 [online]). The Exposition as a whole might have given a visitor the impression of France as a giant motor for converting the irrational energies of the colonies into rationalised industrial and commercial power. And for those visitors who finished off a trip to the Exposition with an evening at the newly opened Moulin Rouge, the cancan dancer might have appeared to embody this process. A contemporary sketch by F. Lunel (Figure 12) suggests that the cancan dancer, like the Eiffel Tower, served as a monument to the nation’s ability to harness the irrational energies of 1789 for the industrial purposes of 1889. She appears to power the electric street lamp that illuminates her, and which bears the year of both the opening of the

Moulin Rouge, and the Exposition which commemorated the Revolution's centenary.



**Figure 12: Sketch by F. Lunel, cover of *Le Courrier Français*, 12 May 1889. Reproduced in Price (1998, back cover)**

The Moulin Rouge announced its inheritance of the Exposition's colonialist economy by erecting a giant model elephant from the Exposition in its pleasure garden. According to Marta Savigliano (1995, 96), a belly dancer performed inside its abdomen. Belly dancing, or the *danse du ventre*, had first been exhibited in Paris at the 1889 Exposition, and quickly became synonymous with both the exotic attraction and the terrifying difference of the colonial other, to the extent that Jules Ferry, Prime Minister of France from 1880-81 and 1883-85, and

a strong proponent of colonialism, complained in 1889 that, “[a]ll that interests the French about the Empire is the belly dance” (Magraw, 1983, 236). Both the cancan and the belly dance displayed the attractions of other bodies, other identities – working class, female, and colonial - with which France was flirting on the margins of its rational body politic. The homology between the attractions offered by the two dances is suggested not only by their co-existence at the Moulin Rouge, but by La Goulue’s shift from cancan dancer to belly dancer in 1895. After leaving the Moulin Rouge, La Goulue established herself as a belly dancer at a Parisian fairground called the Foire du Trône, adorning her booth with two paintings by Toulouse-Lautrec, one portraying her performing the cancan with Valentin Le Désossé at the Moulin Rouge, the other, entitled *La Danse mauresque (Les Almées)* (1895) (Figure 13) showing her performing the high kick of the cancan, but to the accompaniment of a black male drummer in a turban and a tambourine-playing woman in Middle Eastern dress (Price, 1998, 63; Albright, 2007, 133). In the latter painting the audience is composed of Moulin Rouge habitués, including Oscar Wilde, Jane Avril and Toulouse-Lautrec himself. The paintings made visibly manifest La Goulue’s hope that the Moulin Rouge audience would find the attractions of the belly dance interchangeable with those of the cancan.



Figure 13: *La Danse mauresque (Les Almées)* by Toulouse-Lautrec (1895)

However, La Goulue's hopes were unfulfilled as her switch from cancan dancer to belly dancer was not successful or profitable (Price, 1998, 63). Despite their similarities, the cancan and the belly dance nevertheless carried different connotations in the *fin de siècle*. Like the cancan, the seductive sexuality of the belly dance threatened the boundaries of the rational body politic; however, whereas the cancan erased divisions *within* the French nation, facilitating its unification, the belly dance appeared to attack the borders of the national body from outside. Defeat in the Franco-Prussian war had shifted French attention from fear of the other within, to fear of the other without, and thus the irrationality of the cancan appeared benign in comparison with the foreign

movement of the belly dance. Jules Lemaître (1853-1914), the French critic and dramatist, admitted that:

the horrors of the belly dance revealed to me the decency of the cancan.... the dance of the Orient is invading us, and that is why I do not fear sounding the alert, not as a moralist... but as a good Occidental.... This invasion, if it continues, would be deplorable. Our dance is so superior to the other one by its grace, by its wit, by its decency! [The two forms of dance] truly express two different and even contrasting souls, two races, two civilizations.

Lemaître cited in Gordon, 2004, 269

Whereas Rigolboche defined the cancan's Frenchness by its difference from "negro" dancing, the nationalism that the cancan promoted in the Third Republic was defined against the colonial other of the belly dancer.

A photograph from 1890 shows the Moulin Rouge pleasure garden, with the giant elephant standing next to an outdoor stage on which ballerinas are performing (Figure 14). As Savigliano (1995, 96) observes, this juxtaposition illustrates the body politics of colonial rhetoric: the production and performance of civilised European bodies through ballet, is defined by its opposition to the irrational animality of the Orient. The cancan dancer, who performed in the main dance hall of the venue, occupied a space in between the belly dancer and the ballerina. Her irrational movement opposed the control of classical ballet, and went far beyond the incipient irrationality of the romantic ballerina, leading to her description as a 'savage'. However, this irrationality made her the perfect tool with which to forge the liberal nationalism of the Third Republic. Her freedom of movement, harnessed to the nationalist machine, was juxtaposed with the enslaved, foreign irrationality of the belly dancer, who could be liberated



only through rationalising, civilising French colonialism. The cancan dancer was therefore the instrument of a particularly modern political manoeuvre: the strategic appropriation of certain forms of irrationality in the name of liberalism, commercialism and nationalism, while other forms of irrationality are labelled as foreign, other and in need of regulation. This political deployment of the cancan would reach its apotheosis in the 1920s (see next chapter), when the dance would conform to the regimented rhythms of the factory and the nationalist military parade, forewarning of the mass-mechanised fate of those bodies that did not conform to the nationalist machine elsewhere in Europe.



**Figure 14: Moulin Rouge pleasure garden, 1890, published in *I'Illustration*. Reproduced in Rearick (1988, 77)**

### 3.8: A “Modern Salome”: Loïe Fuller and Cinema

By the time of the next Paris Exposition in 1900, the duet of the cancan and the *danse du ventre*, embodying two inextricable facets of the Third Republic, nationalism and colonialism, had been overshadowed by another performance of French identity, that of Loïe Fuller (1862-1928). According to Garelick (1995, 102), the Oriental dances at the 1889 Paris Exposition had offended certain government officials, and so the organisers of the 1900 Exposition were ordered to enforce “decency codes”. Fuller’s performances, although inspired, she claimed, by the Indian ‘nautch’ dancers at the 1889 Exposition (Sperling, 2001, 3 [online]), perfectly fitted this new demand<sup>10</sup>. Like the cancan, Fuller’s body was conceived to be harnessed to various commercial and nationalist machines, as well as theatrical technologies of her own invention. However, unlike the cancan, the seductions of Fuller’s mechanised body were normally kept veiled. While the cancan’s threat of irrational automatism needed to be mediated by external visual technologies, Fuller used visual technology to mediate her own image, and harness herself to the machine, presenting in most of her choreographies a female body desexualised by the rationalisation of science. A number of theorists have argued that Fuller’s performances in Paris from 1892 onwards pre-empted the changes to the dancing body that the 1895 emergence of cinema would bring (Sommer, 1975; Brannigan, 2003 [online]; Gunning, 2003; McCarren, 2003). In this section, however, the argument is advanced that Fuller embodied a cinematic aesthetic that was still a futuristic dream in 1895. Instead, the cinema of 1895 - c.1907, labelled the ‘cinema of attractions’ by Gunning (Gunning, 1990), constituted a mechanical other that is better represented by the uncanny

movements of the puppet-like cancan than Fuller's continuous motion. Fuller pointed towards the mechanised future of the female dancing body, its avant-garde, whereas the cancan evoked a conception of the machine as seductive attraction from which the cinema emerged, but which it would quickly transform.

Fuller, born in the United States, had performed as a burlesque dancer in New York, including nautch routines, and as a skirt dancer in London, before travelling to Paris to perform at the Folies Bergère in 1892, where she was an immediate success (Sommer, 1975). The performances that Fuller developed drew on the manipulation of fabric and veils used in skirt and nautch dancing, and she did not deny the origins of her work in the *fin-de-siècle* craze for representations of the Orient, claiming that she was reviving biblical, Oriental dance styles (Current and Current, 1997, 78-79). This aspect of her work was revealed most strongly in her two interpretations of the legend of Salomé. However, in addition to her experience in popular dance forms, Fuller was also influenced, through the actor Steele MacKaye, by the work of François Delsarte (1811-71), who developed a system of physical training for the effective expression of emotion through voice and gesture, which allowed women to harness the "powers" of their own bodies (Coffman, 2002, 79). In Fuller's work the power of the female, sometimes Orientalised, dancing body was harnessed to and rationalised by scientific technologies of her own invention, which combined the effects of light, fabric, movement and glass. Whereas the irrational movement of cancan dancers and belly dancers fuelled commercial, nationalistic and colonial machines outside of their control, Fuller mechanised her own body for her own commercial and personal gain.

Fuller's most famous innovation was the use of rods attached to yards of fabric which enveloped and extended from her body, and onto which she projected coloured electric lights. By manipulating the material, she could create images of butterflies or flowers, for example, which subsumed her. Enclosing herself within an undulating fabric screen, Fuller drew a veil between the audience and her body, reducing its threatening irrationality. This distinguished her from the popular belly dancers and Spanish dancers of the time, who flaunted their irrational appeal, as noted by the art critic and collector Roger Marx in *La Revue*

Encyclopédique:

Her success is due to the contrast between her kind of dancing and that to which we have recently been subjected. Too many danseuses have been giving poor imitations of "the Andalusian's impish stomping" or have emphasised a swaying of the hips and a rotation of the pelvis, or have resorted to other bodily contortions. These women wear as little as they can get by with, and what they wear accentuates the buttocks and the breasts. Loïe Fuller is utterly different. She keeps her body straight, and she derives effects from the very profusion of her garments.

Marx cited in Current and Current, 1997, 55

Fuller disguised the materiality of her body, concealing its grotesque protrusions and orifices behind swathes of fabric, to create a feminine physical performance that was 'decent' and rational. Ann Cooper Albright similarly argues that, "Fuller employed this costume to draw her audience away from attending to the usual trappings of the music hall (pretty, perky women dancers smiling at the audience and showing lots of leg)" (Albright, 2007, 187-88). By constructing a bounded, closed body, she became desexualised; a journalist from *L'Echo de Paris* reported in 1892 that, "there is no pornography, no coarseness, nothing but the

most poetically artistic” (anon. cited in Current and Current, 1997, 52) in her performances, and she was described in an 1893 issue of *La Revue Encyclopédique* as a “chaste dancer” (Garelick, 1995, 98). Her performances were even considered morally suitable for women and children (Garelick, 1995).

This is not to say that Fuller denied the irrational potential of her body completely. As Albright (2007) points out, Fuller’s two interpretations of Salomé, performed in 1895 and 1907, contrasted with the rest of her oeuvre by unveiling her material body both literally and figuratively. Fuller’s performances as Salomé provoked critics to adopt the language of irrational seduction usually reserved for the cancan dancer and other *femmes fatales*. Marx’s description of the 1895 production contrasts directly with the image of chastity painted in the above quotation: “With a devilish coquetry, she waves her scintillating scarves, which reflect the terrifying flare of the underworld” (Marx cited in Albright, 2007, 130). Fuller’s “*séductrice*” is presented as a particularly mechanical spectre: her movements, normally described in graceful terms, become “jerky and menacing” (Marx cited in Albright, 2007, 130), and in the 1907 production she performed a “Dance of steel”, cast in a “blinding and metallic light” (Albright, 2007, 138). The *Théâtre des Arts (1837-1920)* describes the irrational relationship between performer and audience in Fuller’s final Dance of Fear, “in which she reveals her tragic power, transmitting to her audience actual shudders of terror” (anon. cited in Albright, 2007, 138). Fuller’s embodiments of Salomé represent the temporary replacement of the rationalised, mechanical self with the seductive, irrational aesthetic of the mechanical other.

Albright observes that both recent and contemporary critiques of Fuller's Salomé productions lament the loss of the screening, distancing devices that transformed Fuller's body in her other works. Richard and Marcia Current explain the disappointing critical reception of the 1895 version by noting that,

Loïe could be seen all too well in the Comédie Parisienne, an intimate theater with a small stage, where she was close to her audience in a way that she had never been at the Folies Bergère.... Hence she lost that aura of unreality, ineffability, and mystery that had made her seem a creature of poetic charm.

Current and Current cited in Albright, 2007, 127

As Albright points out, Fuller's performances as Salomé were not universally criticised, and they opened up performative possibilities that were shrouded in her other work. However, her experiments with unveiling also point towards the mediating mechanisms that made the majority of her work distinct from the mechanical *femmes fatales* that audiences were accustomed to.

Fuller's investigation of methods for harnessing the power of the female dancing body led her to explore the mediating effects of visual technologies such as electric lighting, which she used in conjunction with movement to produce a range of effects. One of the devices that she used at the Exposition of 1900 was a wall of transparent glass mounted between the audience and the performer. With the correct lighting, the glass acted as a one-way mirror through which the audience could see Fuller, but she could only see herself (Garelick, 1995). The glass wall reproduced the mediating effect of the glass lens used in the visual technologies of the monocle, opera glasses, photography and the stereoscope. Through it spectators gained voyeuristic access to the separate world of the

performer, rather than being directly addressed by her. This view through the keyhole was enticing, while maintaining the rational separation between spectators and performer. The rationalising effect of technology on the Orientalised female body in Fuller's work was noted by the poet, novelist and critic Camille Mauclair, who observed that in her choreography, "the traditional art of ancient oriental civilizations [was] extenuated by science" (Mauclair cited in Garelick, 1995, 98). This technological mediation of the seductive powers of the belly dancer earned her the nickname "modern Salomé" (Garelick, 1995, 86).

According to Garelick, at the Exposition of 1900, Fuller's use of glass replicated the display of the bodies of 'native' women behind windows. Garelick compares this method of presentation with an analysis by Malek Alloula of the photographs of North African women that were popular in France at this time. Alloula likens the photographed women to "butterflies and insects that museums of natural history and taxidermists exhibit in their glass display cases" (Alloula cited in Garelick, 1995, 92). Garelick comments that "[l]ike the taxidermist's butterflies, these [native] women are images under glass to be admired as scientific oddities" (Garelick, 1995, 93). The image of the butterfly placed under glass was a common motif of the control of nature by science in the late nineteenth century, and this model was also applied to the colonial relationship. Similarly, in Tomorrow's Eve, Edison's relationship with Alicia, whose visage he will shortly use to complete the android Hadaly, is described using the same metaphor:

Edison watched this woman [Alicia] with the keen glance of an entomologist who has discovered, after long searching, the fabulous

night-moth which is destined, tomorrow, to form the jewel of a museum collection with a silver pin in its back.

Villiers, 1982, 172

Fuller placed the butterfly into which she transformed her body, under glass, allowing its irrationality to be contained, controlled, and harnessed for other purposes. But unlike the North African women or Alicia, “Fuller played both the butterfly and the taxidermist” (Garelick, 1995, 95); she played both the Orientalised other and the American/French colonialist/scientist.

In a later consideration of Fuller, Garelick (1998) discusses the work of Philippe Hamon, who argues that in the late nineteenth century, glass cases were associated not just with the museum cabinet, but with France’s developing “consumer culture of display” (1998, 104). Fuller also drew on the capacity of visual technologies to mass produce the image. In one routine she danced in a room of glass mirrors, creating multiple reflections of her body. As Garelick points out, this act revealed the mechanism of the mass production of female dancing bodies, characteristic of the entertainment industry in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, it also parodied the mass reproduction of mediated images of the female dancing body, such as Toulouse-Lautrec’s poster of La Goulue. Fuller’s image was captured by countless artists and designers, including Toulouse-Lautrec, many of which attempted to harness the attraction of her mechanised body for commercial ends (see Current and Current, 1997). However, Fuller not only reproduced her own image on stage, but sold it in the foyer of her theatre at the Exposition of 1900, in the form of lamps and dolls (Garelick, 1995, 101). Unlike the cancan dancers at the Moulin Rouge, she mass produced her own image to feed into the commercial machine.



By placing herself behind glass, Fuller not only turned the mediating effects of nineteenth-century visual technologies upon her own body, but prefigured their further development into the cinematograph. Fuller's premonstration of the cinema has long been noted. Germaine Dulac (1882-1942), the avant-garde film director and theorist, said of Fuller's work, "that also was cinema, the play of light and of colors in relief and in movement" (Dulac cited in Gunning, 2003, 85). Sally Sommer, one of the first dance historians to research Fuller, considered that, "[c]entral to Fuller's performance was a moving image made animate by the projection of coloured light and slides" (Sommer, 1975, 54). And Erin Brannigan (2003 [online]) expands McCarren's (2003) argument that Fuller embodied a new conception of movement as constant flux, rather than a series of static poses, that cinema would embrace.

However, Fuller's position as the precursor to cinema becomes problematic when viewed in relation to the aesthetic that predominated the medium's first decade, labelled the cinema of attractions by Gunning. According to Gunning, "the cinema of attractions directly solicits spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle" (Gunning, 1990, 58). He argues that Fuller pre-empted this aesthetic, citing as evidence a response she gave in an interview in 1910:

The Delicatessen man is indeed more likely than the educated man to grasp the meaning of my dances. He *feels* them. It is a question of temperament more than culture. My magnetism goes out over the footlights and seizes him so that he *must* understand – in spite of his delicatessen.

Fuller cited in Gunning, 2003, 83, original emphasis

However, McCarren lists as one of the similarities between Fuller and the cinema the fact that her performances were “[d]ifferent from the kind of show that offers itself to the gaze of fans” (McCarren, 2003, 50). Indeed, Fuller’s use of technology usually served to reduce the irrational seduction of her body, except in the *Salomé* productions. Therefore, Fuller is aligned with the cinema by these theorists both because she constructs herself as a hypnotic attraction (Gunning) and because she does not (McCarren).

In fact, as Gunning notes, she did both at once, placing herself “midway between pornography and sublimation” (Gunning, 2003, 84). Fuller incorporated into her performances the construction of the female body as an attraction that she learnt on the burlesque and music hall stage. But what distinguished her from the other female dancers of the time was her mechanisation and rationalisation of this image, performing on herself the transformation that visual technologies had previously imposed. Indeed, the symbolist poet, Stéphane Mallarmé wrote that Fuller’s significance lay in the fact that her performances constituted, “an intoxication of art and simultaneously an industrial achievement” (Gunning, 2003, 82). Fuller herself declared that she wished to satisfy both the high, moral faculties, and the low, immoral ones: “I want to create a new form of art, an art completely irrelevant to the usual theories, an art *giving to the soul and senses at the same time complete delight*” (Fuller cited in Albright, 2007, 185, emphasis added). Where this argument diverges from Gunning’s is in aligning this simultaneous revelation and concealment of the body not with the cinema of attractions, but with the narrative cinema that succeeded it.

Pre-cinematic visual images of dancers evoked a performance that remained separate from the machine that recorded it, leaving the distinction between irrational performer and rational spectator unchallenged. In narrative cinema, however, the dancer became engulfed in a separate cinematic world in which her performance was always already rationalised by the narrative logic of the editing process. Irrational performer and rationalising visual technology became indistinguishable, and therefore disappeared as separate entities. Benjamin describes this “tendency to promote the mutual penetration of art and science” as “one of the revolutionary functions of the film” (Benjamin, 1973b, 229). The seductions of the dancer in narrative cinema reach the spectator not directly, but only through identification with onscreen characters. Therefore, her attraction is no longer her own, but melts into the attraction of the technological world that cinema creates.

It was this coalescence of the irrational body and rational technology that Fuller pre-empted. She was inspired by Delsarte’s claim, reminiscent of Benjamin’s, that from harnessing the powers of the body “results the intimate fusion of art and science, which, though each one is born of a different source, nevertheless ally, interpenetrate and reciprocally prove each other” (Delsarte cited in Coffman, 2002, 79-80)<sup>11</sup>. Albright reports that by re-embodiment Fuller’s choreographies, she became more aware of “the interconnected realms of dance and machine in Fuller’s dancing... Fuller’s theatrical mechanisms brought her closer to, rather than distancing her from, her sensate body” (Albright, 2007, 187). The bodily and technological components of Fuller’s work vanished into

evocations of transforming images that subsumed both. In Fuller, as in the cinematic aesthetic that emerged in the first years of the twentieth century, the imposition of technology on the body became invisible, leaving artforms in which the boundary between irrational performer and rational spectator could disappear, because rationality and irrationality were already combined in the spectacle itself. This prefigured the revolutionary potential of film that Benjamin recognised in the 1930s: “[film] offers precisely because of the thoroughgoing permeation of reality with mechanical equipment, an aspect of reality which is free of all equipment” (Benjamin, 1973b, 227). As both Giovanni Lista and Brannigan (2003 [online]) have hinted, Fuller created an aesthetic ideal that the cinema could only fulfil after the emergence of the narrative mode: “the cinema uniquely was able to equal, very much later, the effects of dematerialization and mobility of the image sought by Loïe” (Lista cited in Gunning, 2003, 85).

By contrast, the cinema of attractions laid bare the constituent elements of the cinematic aesthetic before they had been synthesised. Early films usually consisted of a single, unedited scene shot from a static camera. Contemporary stage dance routines were a popular subject. The performers made only minor adjustments to their choreographies for filming, and performed directly to the camera as if it were an audience member. Therefore, as in the cancan and other popular dance forms of the late nineteenth century, the irrational performance remained distinguishable from the visual technology that captured it. The filmed dancer still referred to a live performance that existed beyond the camera, and her interaction with the film spectator was direct, evoking the immediacy of a live encounter. Conversely, as Gunning (1990) notes, the technology of the

cinema was not hidden behind the illusion of a fictional reality, but was an attraction in itself, quite apart from its subject matter.

Early cinema was not a smooth fusion of body and machine. Rather, the animate body and the inanimate camera, still distinct entities, were brought into jarring combination, creating the uncanny confusion of animate and inanimate that was characteristic of the mechanical other<sup>12</sup>. Elsewhere Gunning (1995a) describes the “aesthetic of astonishment” generated by the early film practice of presenting static images which then flickered into animation. The impact of this moment was sometimes heightened by the patter of the showman who sometimes introduced early film showings. Albert E. Smith’s recollection of the voiceover given by his Vitagraph company co-founder J. Stuart Blackton over the still image of Black Diamond Express (1896), recalls Gautier’s fear of the life-like locomotive:

In just a moment, a cataclysmic moment, my friends, a moment without equal in the history of our times, you will see this train take life in a marvellous and most astounding manner. It will rush towards you, belching smoke and fire from its monstrous iron throat.

Smith cited in Gunning, 1995a, 120

The horror of this spectre of the machine cranking to life is preserved in cinema’s origin myth of spectators’ reactions to the first screening of the Lumière brothers’ L’Arrivée d’un Train à la Ciotat (Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat) (1895): “spectators reared back in their seats, or screamed, or got up and ran from the auditorium (or all three in succession)” (Gunning, 1995a, 114). Like the train, and the experience of modern life according to commentators like Georg Simmel, “the images of the cinema of attractions rush forward to meet their

viewers” (Gunning, 1995a, 121), breaking rational bodily boundaries and crossing the rational line between inanimate machine and animate reality, causing an irrational, violent reaction<sup>13</sup>. Gunning notes that early film exhibitions were often rationalised as instructive and informative, but showmen knew that their product depended on the attraction of the irrational thrill as an antidote to the alienation, the separation of body from body, characteristic of modern life. The train, already demonised for its uncanniness by romantics such as Gautier, became an icon of the new, cinematic mechanical other. But it also formed a link, through Gautier’s description of “a contredanse entitled The Railway”, to one of the cinema’s predecessors in the performance of mechanical otherness, the cancan.

The cancan’s uncanny performance of the dancing machine, reminiscent of a puppet, or in Gautier’s case, the railway, evoked the same disturbing image of the runaway automaton as the cinema of attractions. Gordon (2001a) argues that the epileptic aesthetic of late nineteenth-century Parisian cabaret, in which the cancan participated, was carried into the cinema by performers who moved from stage to screen. Gordon’s film examples are mostly from the early twentieth century, by which time editing and narrative had already begun to impose a barrier between performer and spectator. Arguably, however, the continuity between live performances of mechanical otherness and the emergence of cinema as a dancing machine, can be seen most clearly in the early single-shot films of dancers. Many of these films depicted cancan dancers (for example, *Quadrille Dansé par les Étoiles du Moulin-Rouge*, 1900) or belly dancers (for example, *La Danse du Ventre*, 1900). Imitators of Fuller were also very popular subjects, both

in France and the United States (for example, *Danse Serpentine*, 1900 and *Serpentine Dance by Annabelle*, 1896). However, as both McCarren (2003, 62-63) and Elizabeth Coffman (2002, 86) note, Fuller's first and most frequent imitator, Annabelle Moore, performed not for a future, cinematic spectator, as Fuller did, but to seduce her immediate audience by revealing her legs and arms. Coffman adds that the same can be said of all of Fuller's subsequent imitators. Therefore, although these performers copied Fuller's choreography, they danced as the mechanical other, rather than the futuristic techno-body that Fuller had created<sup>14</sup>. All of these early dance films draw on the notion of the dancer as a mechanical seductress that had first developed in the live cancan, and that had been expanded into a broad performance aesthetic in the Parisian cabaret routines that Gordon describes<sup>15</sup>. The uncanny attraction of the dancer's automatic movement pre-empted, and then became absorbed into, the uncanny attraction of cinema's automatic movement. However, although Fuller played with the idea of unveiling her body as a mechanical other in her interpretations of Salomé, her most celebrated work offered a glimpse of a new aesthetic in which the fatal feminine body was present, but behind the veil of technology.

The bourgeoisie had been excited and scandalised by the dancing machine, for most of the nineteenth century. However, at the end of the century, Fuller had pointed the way towards a different sort of entertainment, one in which irrationality was penetrated by rationalising mediation. In comparison with this new ideal, the seductive immediacy of the cinema of attractions seemed retrograde. Viewed through the social evolutionary framework of a progression from the irrational to the rational, its irrational uncanniness appeared primitive,

in the sense of an under-evolved form. In 1913, the critic Louis Haugmard lamented that through the “aesthetic of the cinematograph”,

the charmed masses will learn to combat all will to reason... they will only know how to open their big and empty eyes, and look, look, look... The cinematograph will be [the only mode of] action for neurasthenics.

Haugmard cited in Gordon, 2001a, 542

The stupefying power of the cinema, according to Haugmard, breaks down rational defences against degeneration into the primitive state of hysteria.

This designation has since clung to the cinema of attractions, casting it as the unsophisticated forerunner of ‘real’ cinema. For example, Noël Burch (1990) differentiates between what he calls the Primitive Mode of Representation, which corresponds with the cinema of attractions, and the Institutional Mode of Representation, or narrative cinema. Similarly, Larry Billman, in his history of dance on film, celebrates the “dance directors and choreographers [who] broke the primitive format of merely photographing stage dance” (Billman, 1997, 1). However, at the turn of the twentieth century the label ‘primitive’ referred not to the relative status of early film as an underdeveloped prelude to the ‘main show’ of classical cinema, only discernable in retrospect, but to its employment of a mode of presentation and spectatorship considered irrational, and therefore associated with the primitive and the lower class, a type of entertainment to which the bourgeoisie now sought a rational alternative<sup>16</sup>.

The bourgeois rejection of the cinema of attractions was signalled by branding not only the technology as primitive, but also the physical reactions of its



spectators. Gunning notes that the reaction ascribed to the early spectators of Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat is,

a state usually attributed to savages in their primal encounter with the advanced technology of Western colonialists, howling and fleeing in impotent terror before the power of the machine.

Gunning, 1995a, 114

This physical reaction was associated not only with a technology that confused animate and inanimate, but with the inability of the spectator to differentiate between illusion and reality. Indeed, Jentsch bases his psychological approach to the uncanny on his belief that some people are more affected by the confusion of animate and inanimate than others, depending on factors such as age, race, intellect, and mental health. Like the origin myth that Gunning describes, Jentsch claims that fear of the animated machine (again, a railway train) is characteristic of the primitive:

the same emotion occurs when, as has been described, a wild man has his first sight of a locomotive or of a steam-boat, for example, perhaps at night. The feeling of trepidation will here be very great, for as a consequence of the enigmatic autonomous movement and the regular noises of the machine, reminding him of human breath, the giant apparatus can easily impress the completely ignorant person as a living mass.

Jentsch, 1996, 11

Before the cinema had even achieved its ideal integration of body and machine, a new ideal cinematic spectator was being constructed by rendering the old mode of spectatorship, defined by an embodied response to the otherness of the spectacle, as primitive. This primitive vulnerability to mechanical illusions was considered to be strongest in those sections of society that had been considered

irrational throughout the nineteenth century. Burch (1990) argues that early cinema was deemed suitable only for the lower classes, and among the bourgeoisie, only women and children. This was due specifically to the alignment of the cinema of attractions with a nineteenth-century mode of entertainment that derived its appeal from bodily interaction, releasing spectators from the constraints of rationality, as a commentator in Ciné-Journal argued in 1908:

The cinematograph offers working people, after their daily toil, for a few *sous*, sometimes even in their local café, the illusions they crave in the most unexpected forms. It responds to... the need... [of] people with little leisure time who wish for violent nervous stimulation rather than intellectual exercise.

anon. cited in Burch, 1990, 49

French, British and American filmmakers contributed to the degradation of embodied spectatorship by portraying it onscreen in narratives which made it appear irrational, highlighting its incongruity with the modern medium of cinema. For example, in The Countryman and the Cinematograph (dir. Robert Paul, 1901) and Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show (dir. Edwin S. Porter, 1902) (which appears to be a remake of the former), the physical reactions of a country bumpkin to a series of films are portrayed as comedic. In the Porter version, the first two films that Uncle Josh watches are previous Edison films, Parisian Dance (1897) and Black Diamond Express (1896). Here, two icons of embodied spectatorship are brought together: the cancan and the railway train. In response to Parisian Dance, Uncle Josh jumps out of his box and joins in the cancan, whereas the approaching train in Black Diamond Express causes him to leap back into his box in fright. In the third film, The Country Couple, Uncle

Josh thinks he recognises his daughter in a clinch with a young man, who he tries to punch, pulling down the projection screen to reveal an angry kinetoscope operator, with whom he proceeds to fight. Uncle Josh's embodied film spectatorship, which confuses image with reality, is shown to destroy the filmic illusion. Other films similarly ridiculed the embodied spectatorship of live popular dance, such as *La Bous-Bous Mie* (attributed variously to Emile Cohl, Etienne Arnaud and Louis Feuillade, 1909), in which a female music hall spectator uncontrollably imitates the erotic movements of a dance called the *Bous-Bous Mie*, to comic effect (Gordon, 2001b, 157-60; 2001a, 547-49). In these examples, irrational, embodied responses to the cinema or live popular dance forms are attributed to the spectator's inability to rationalise the spectacle, to separate her/himself from the performance, and therefore to resist its seductions.

In the first years of cinema, the irrational spectator was taken out of the auditorium, placed on the screen, drained of agency, and ridiculed as a source of low comedy. The tension between rationality and irrationality, previously mapped onto the relationship between spectator and performer, now became absorbed into the narrative, freeing the spectator from embodiment and allowing a new, modern viewing position to emerge. The properly cinematic spectator, this rhetoric implies, is one who recognises the embodied mode of spectatorship as primitive, attached to a bygone era of entertainment, and instead employs a modern approach to cinema, that of passive absorption in the narrative<sup>17</sup>.

By veiling the attractions of her body behind a rationalising fabric or glass screen, liberating the spectator from the problem of resisting seduction, Fuller provided a model for the shift from the cinema of attractions to narrative cinema, in which the cinematic spectacle was placed behind a narrative screen, allowing a disembodied, modern viewing position. Behind the screen, the attraction was still visible, but its hypnotic threat was curtailed. This differed from the glass lens placed between dancer and spectator in nineteenth-century visual technologies, including early cinema, which contained the possibility of magnification of the irrational, as well as attenuation. Modernism was characterised by an oscillation between these two effects of mediation. Bruno Latour (2000) argues that a tension exists in modernity between purification, in which subject and object (performer and spectator, for example) are separated, and hybridity, in which subject and object inevitably cross-fertilise and contaminate one another. Furthermore, hybridity always precedes purification; purification is a desperate and, Latour argues, futile attempt to clean up the messiness of hybridity. Fuller proposed a way of purifying the hybridity of irrational performer/spectator relations, in which the spectator was always at risk of infection from the performer's automatism, by rationalising the spectacle, allowing the spectator's rationality to remain unchallenged.

This act of cleansing is often conceived as liberation from enslavement to the irrational. The Delsartean technique of harnessing the powers of the female body would become the primary means through which women 'liberated' their bodies at the turn of the century (Coffman, 2002). However, what the female body lost in this process was its capacity to undermine the ideal of rationalisation itself. In

applying the rationalising principles of science to her own body, rather than allowing them to be applied from outside by the observer, Fuller gained the agency and authority that accompanied the rational role of the scientist, but also became complicit in the suppression of the subversive power of the irrational. The female body harnessed to the machine, by contrast, always held the possibility of dancing out of control, of enslaving its masters. At the turn of the twentieth century, this subversive capacity of the dancing body was being submerged into the category of the primitive, and new notions of the unconscious, becoming the unspoken, repressed history of respectable narrative cinema and modern dance. However Latour argues that this ideal of purification was never fully achieved, that hybrids continued to proliferate, and that our claims to be modern belied the tumult just beneath the surface. As the cancan and the cinema of attractions submitted to the demands of rational modernity, they carried with them the uncanny ghosts of a less certain world.

### **3.9: “Le Moulin Rouge est mort... Vive le Moulin Rouge!”**

As the modern female techno-body, represented by Fuller, conquered Europe, the uncanny coupling of body to machine in the cancan, like early cinema, seemed increasingly outmoded. If Lunel’s sketch (Figure 12) had suggested that the liberal, inclusive body politic performed in the cancan was the model for the French Third Republic in 1889, then Fuller had posited an alternative national body by the time of the Paris Exposition of 1900. Her use of technology as a means of desexualisation was often attributed to her American-ness, and Garelick (1995) argues that it was this conversion of irrationality into efficient

industrial spectacle that France wished to perform on its own body politic. An American in Paris, Fuller signified the mechanical purification of the cancan-dancing, irrational body of the French nation, replacing it with a healthy, rationalised body, on which a new, modern nationalism would be built. Accordingly, the cancan itself was soon forced into the regimented lines and military precision of the new French body, both live and on screen.

The shift towards rational, disembodied, modern spectatorship was manifested in public rejection of the participatory nature of dance halls, in favour of the audience/performer separation offered by variety theatres. As a result, the last public participation cancan in the main dance hall of the Moulin Rouge was performed on 29<sup>th</sup> December 1902 (Pessis and Crepineau, 1990, 55-56). The Pleasure Guide to Paris for Bachelors reported the following year that the closure was due to the fact that, “[w]hat was known as the realistic quadrille [the *quadrille réaliste* or cancan] had lost its vogue” (anon., 1903, 85). The Moulin Rouge dance hall was then converted into a variety theatre, showing revues - large-scale shows in which the female body was exhibited not as an immediately threatening embodiment of irrationality, but as a mass-produced, anonymous spectacle. This act of rationalisation and modernisation transformed the attractions of low culture into those of high culture, as the Pleasure Guide notes:

though the present house has but little connection with the Moulin Rouge of by-gone days – save the association of the name – it will still be gay, and even gayer than in days of yore, but its gaiety will be of a different order, so that the new house may be a meeting place of a higher class, and the sights witnessed of an elevating character, giving pleasure both to residents and visitors of such a nature that they will at all times bear reflection.

anon., 1903, 86

The Moulin Rouge was thus reborn as a modern establishment, which, like narrative cinema, presented rationalised bodies for mass public consumption. As the Pleasure Guide put it: “In the latter part of 1902 the cry was heard, ‘Le Moulin Rouge est mort,’ but to-day it is ‘Vive le Moulin-Rouge’” (anon., 1903, 84).

In this new, modern context, the cancan body began to undergo a transformation in which its irrationality was submerged, controlled and ordered into a form that Seurat had predicted, and that would have its heyday in the mass culture of the 1920s and 1930s. This new cancan aimed for an ideal that was the diametric opposite of the irrational nineteenth-century cancan: a regimented line of dancers who moved in precise unison. Although the rationalised cancan was performed live in cabarets such as the new Moulin Rouge, it became most strongly associated with narrative cinema, whose modernising transformation from the cinema of attractions paralleled that of the cancan in the early twentieth century. Accordingly, the twentieth-century history of the cancan discussed in the remainder of this thesis will be focussed mainly on the dance’s onscreen manifestations, starting with the cluster of cancan-related films which were made in the 1920s.

Barely two months before the closure of the dance hall at the Moulin Rouge, a new dance form premiered in Paris which would replace the old-fashioned cancan as the target of the bourgeoisie’s desires and fears. The cakewalk debuted on 1st November 1902 in the review Les Joyeux Nègres at the Nouveau-Cirque,

performed by two African-American dancers called Mr. and Mrs. Elks and their troupe (see Gordon, 2003, 636). According to Gordon (2003, 654) the cakewalk was derived from the parodic dances performed by African American slaves in imitation of the dances of their white slave masters, and had been incorporated into blackface minstrel shows in the United States in the 1880s. The dance employed strutting steps, often lifting the knees high in the air, with the spine arched backwards. One of the European dances parodied in the cakewalk was the quadrille (before its transformation into the cancan). The cancan and the cakewalk were therefore linked via their subversion of the quadrille, the former initially performed by the working class, and the latter initially performed by African Americans, although in both cases the subverted version was later reappropriated by the elite. Jean Cocteau (1991), in his memoir of 1935, recalls the first performance of the cakewalk in France, which he describes as “the arrival of rhythm from America” (Cocteau, 1991, 46):

They danced, they slid, they reared, they broke themselves in two, in three, in four, they drew themselves up, they bowed... And behind them, an entire city, all of Europe, started to dance. And, through their example, rhythm took over the new world and afterwards the new world of the old world, and the rhythm spread to the machines and from the machines back to men and it was to go on forever  
Cocteau, 1991, 47-48

The cakewalk exhibited a puppet-like fragmentation of the body, and an infectious enslavement to machines, that the cancan had previously embodied in its incarnation as the mechanical other. However, while the cancan, in its original form, could no longer be reconciled with France’s new conception of itself as modern, the cakewalk provided a spectacle of the dancing machine that could be distanced from French modernity due to its American origin and racial otherness.



The cakewalk embodied the flipside of the rationalising influence of American machine culture that Fuller represented, the primitive source against which modernity defined itself, but from which it drew its vitality. France embraced this foreign mechanical other, but simultaneously sought to distance itself from its own internal other, the cancan. As the cancan underwent modernisation, the older, irrational version was increasingly associated with the pre-modern French past, a time of innocence before France faced the realities of the modern, industrial world. It became France's hidden primitive history, overshadowed by the American, racial otherness of the cakewalk and the other black performances that would feed Parisian negrophilia in the 1920s (see Archer-Straw, 2000), but still present, as an echo, in the fettered kicks of the chorus line.

The cancan came to embody modernity's ambivalent relationship to the moment just before Fuller, narrative cinema and modern nationalism. Unlike Fuller's work, in which the seductive properties of the female body, glimpsed in the *Salomé* productions, were deliberately veiled, allowing irrational and rational elements, art and science in Delsarte's terms, to work together and enhance one another, the rationalisation of the cancan always took the form of a suppression, a forced regimentation, which the forces of irrationality constantly threatened to rupture. By conjuring the ghost of its past, repressed incarnation, the cancan signified the primitive irrationality lying just below the surface of the rational, modern body, ready to erupt at any moment. By the 1920s the dance would evoke an irrational history that could not be fully exorcised from the present, and would therefore re-emerge in the cancan films of the 1920s and the Hollywood musicals of the 1930s.

### **3.10: Conclusion**

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries produced two different conceptions of the machine: as a rational tool for scientifically controlling the irrational human body, and as an uncontrollable other whose automatic movements could induce irrationality in the spectator. Certain nineteenth-century dance forms, particularly romantic ballet and the cancan, drew on the latter model as part of their subversive performance of seductive irrationality. Spectators employed a range of visual technologies as a means of gaining closer access to these mechanised spectacles, while maintaining rational, scientific separation from them. In particular, photography allowed the contradictory magnifying and distancing properties of the glass lens to be mass produced, exemplifying a method of harnessing the hypnotic power of the dancer that would revolutionise mass marketing and mass politics in the 1890s. Early cinema adopted the same approach, presenting the dancer as an attraction captured by the camera.

However, during the same period, Fuller proposed an alternative conception of the mechanised female body, turning the rationalising effects of nineteenth-century visual technologies upon herself, to produce not a mechanical other, but a seamless, scientific interpenetration of human and machine, from which the spectator felt no threat of infection. Fuller purified the irrational dancing body, catalysing the modernisation of dance, cinema and nationalist politics around the turn of the twentieth century. This shift signalled the demise of the irrational cancan, which was subjected to rationalisation, and absorbed into narrative cinema. Its mechanical otherness was projected onto the black, American bodies

of cakewalk dancers, which were located at a safe distance from French modernity. The new, modernised cancan embodied the suppression of the irrational deemed necessary for the construction of modern France, but it also held the possibility that the 'primitive' immediacy of the past might re-emerge, a prospect that would provoke deep analysis, fierce debate, and artistic exploration in cultural criticism and filmmaking of the 1920s.

## **Chapter 4: Kicking Against the March of Rationality: The Cancan on Stage and Screen in the Interwar Period**

### **4.1: Introduction**

This chapter focuses on the rationalised version of the cancan that emerged in live performance, on film and in cultural criticism in the 1920s and 1930s. After the conversion of the Moulin Rouge from a dance hall into a theatre in 1903, the venue continued to stage revues, which sometimes featured the cancan, until February 1915, when the auditorium and lobby were destroyed by a fire (Pessis and Crepineau, 1990, 59). When the Moulin Rouge reopened in 1921, it presented a very different cancan than the dance of the 1890s (Price, 1998). The dancers, arranged in linear formations, performed set choreographies in precise unison, unlike the improvised performances of the previous century which highlighted the individuality of particular performers. The embodiment of irrationality was seemingly replaced by the embodiment of rationality.

The rationalised cancan also re-emerged on film in the 1920s. After the shift in the dominant film aesthetic from the cinema of attractions to narrative cinema around 1907 (Gunning, 1990), the cancan temporarily lost its popularity as a subject for filmmakers. My research has found evidence of nineteen films featuring the cancan between 1896 and 1906, but only one film which may have included the dance between 1907 and 1921<sup>1</sup>. Tom Gunning argues that during this period the cinema of attractions went “underground” (1990, 57), forming “an undercurrent flowing beneath narrative logic and diegetic realism” (Gunning,

1995a, 123), and re-emerged in the 1920s in avant-garde film and film musicals. The cancan followed the same pattern, re-appearing in several narrative films during the 1920s including The Phantom of the Moulin Rouge (1925), and Moulin Rouge (1928)<sup>2</sup>. The narratives of these films expose the rational appearance of the 1920s cancan as a façade, obscuring the sensuous, irrational temptations that the dance holds for the unwitting modern, rational individual.

This survival of the irrational inside rational modernity, formed the basis of Sigmund Freud's modern psychology, and then became a topic of fierce debate amongst intellectuals associated with the Frankfurt School from the 1920s onwards, particularly Siegfried Kracauer, Theodor Adorno, and Walter Benjamin. Although only Kracauer addressed the contemporary cancan in detail, these writers articulated ideas that the cancan mediated physically, and they therefore provide a context within which the cancan's complex cultural meanings at this time can be situated. In particular, the writings of these intellectuals help to chart a shift in the cancan's connotations during this period from ambivalence, through liberation, to enslavement.

#### **4.2: The Irrational within the Rational: World War I and Freud**

In the 1890s, the success of Loïe Fuller in France had signified a new faith and optimism in the nationalised, technologised body, replacing the degenerative body that the cancan represented. Just as Fuller had rationalised her body, the work of Etienne-Jules Marey and others at the *Station Physiologique* had rationalised the body of the French soldier, and the hopes of France were placed

on this modernised physique in the First World War (1914-1918). However, the massive death toll in the war prompted a questioning of this faith, with varied conclusions. Some blamed the war on the presence of savagery in modern civilisation (Gates Jnr. and Dalton, 1998, 5), while others blamed European ideals of rationality and progress, for which the irrational and the primitive seemed a desirable alternative (Archer-Straw, 2000, 18). Freud's work in the 1910s and 1920s articulated a model through which the persistence of the irrational in modern society could be understood, and even embraced, while still maintaining its pathological and primitive associations. This model, which had its roots in late nineteenth-century psychophysics and social evolutionism, underlay the form in which the cancan re-emerged both live and on film in the 1920s, and the cultural criticism of the Frankfurt School, which engaged with the same ideas.

From his earliest work in 1885 with Jean-Martin Charcot on hysteria at the Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris, Freud was interested in the psychology of the irrational. In The Interpretation of Dreams (1954), first published in 1899, he outlined his notion of the unconscious, as the location of the irrational in the human psyche, drawing on the work of Pierre Janet and Alfred Binet. In the same work, he introduced the idea that the unconscious is the primitive part of the psyche, which nevertheless exerts a strong influence on the mind of the civilised individual. Freud was greatly influenced by Ernst Haeckel's (1834-1919) variation on the evolutionary theory of Charles Darwin, the idea that ontogeny (the development of the individual organism) recapitulates phylogeny (the evolutionary history of a species). However, whereas Haeckel mapped

evolutionary history onto the biological development of the individual, Freud mapped it onto psychological development, arguing that evolutionary history is recapitulated in individual psychological maturation, and its stages are preserved in the structure of the adult mind:

Behind this childhood of the individual we are promised a picture of the phylogenetic childhood – a picture of the development of the human race, of which the individual's development is in fact an abbreviated recapitulation influenced by the chance circumstances of life.

Freud, 1954, 548

For Freud, therefore, primitive psychology survives in the modern psyche in the form of the unconscious. Irrational thoughts and beliefs are not dismissed entirely by the rational mind, but merely repressed into the unconscious realm. However, they may return to consciousness under certain circumstances, and Freud refers to this as regression, because it represents a return to the primitive. One such circumstance is the experience of a coincidence or strange occurrence that invites an irrational, superstitious explanation. In this situation the rational individual feels the temptation to regress to irrational beliefs that s/he has repressed. Freud (1990) used Ernst Jentsch's (1996) term '*das unheimliche*' or 'the uncanny' to describe this sensation in his 1919 article on the subject. Whereas Jentsch associated the uncanny with the intellectual uncertainty of confusion between the animate and inanimate, creating a moment in which rational categorisation and understanding is confounded, Freud extends the uncanny to other situations in which the rational mind leaps to irrational explanations, such as the perception of a ghost.

Uncanny experiences such as these, Freud claims, tempt the subject to return to “a phase of individual development corresponding to th[e] animistic stage in primitive men” (Freud, 1990, 363). Freud characterises this return in terms that are reminiscent of the grotesque or irrational body: he describes, “a regression to a time when the ego had not yet marked itself off sharply from the external world and from other people” (1990, 358). Here, the desire of the rational, bourgeois individual for the unboundedness of the excluded irrational body, a phenomenon that the previous chapters have described on a cultural and historical level, is transposed onto a psychological level. Freud’s notion of repression of the irrational corresponds with the historical repression of the irrational body in the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, by interpreting the social as psychological, Freud’s theory denies the historical and cultural construction of the rational and irrational, and therefore preserves the hierarchy between them as natural and universal. The psychoanalytical model represents an attempt to understand the rational/irrational dichotomy in post-Enlightenment European culture, but from within, and limited by, the hierarchical, rationalist, evolutionist conditions of that culture.

However, in the 1920s, Freud’s work seemed to offer a rational explanation for the persistent presence of irrational desires in modern, rational, European society. The irrational was considered to be evident not just in the horrors of war, but also in the post-war growth of mass culture, particularly the popularity of jazz and negrophilia in Paris (Archer-Straw, 2000). Freud addressed mass psychology specifically in Group Psychoanalysis and the Analysis of the Ego (1945), originally published in 1922, in which he applied psychoanalysis to the crowd



theory of Gustav Le Bon (1896) (see section 2.12). He demonstrated that his theories of regression and loss of the individuated ego could be applied to hypnosis (the rational boundaries of the ego are broken as the patient loses his will to the hypnotist) and crowd behaviour (the individual loses his will to that of the group). The bond between hypnotist and subject, or between members of a group, “is not based upon perception and reasoning but upon an erotic tie” (Freud, 1945, 100), conceived as irrational. The surrender of individual will that this libidinal bond engenders, opens the subject to the suggestion of the hypnotist or the leader of the group. Just as the individual regresses to primitive psychology, the group regresses to the primal horde, a social evolutionary term that Freud borrowed from Darwin. The idea that irrationality lay just below the surface of the rational individual, ready to emerge in response to hypnosis or participation in a group, shaped the idea of mass culture in the 1920s. In particular, the cancan, which came to embody mass culture in this period, was both celebrated and critiqued using these terms.

#### **4.3: Mass Culture and the Rationalised Cancan**

The live cancan, which had become unpopular at the turn of the twentieth century, re-emerged in the 1920s in a new form. This reincarnation responded to the contradictions that animated the new mass culture. Mass culture in France grew out of the tension between the nation’s late nineteenth-century self-image as degenerate and irrational, and its modern, industrial aspirations. This tension manifested itself in the impulse to harness the irrational body for commercial and nationalistic purposes, a cultural shift that Fuller had embodied. By the 1920s,

this project had produced an ideal body that was controlled, sculpted and standardised, but also attractive, captivating and titillating, that is, both rational and irrational, a physique that could be mass produced either for purposes of mass marketing or mass politics<sup>3</sup>. The form in which the cancan regained popularity, variously called the precision kick-line, chorus line, or French cancan, satisfied these demands by repressing its irrational, nineteenth-century aesthetic, without extinguishing it completely, leaving a body whose discipline always signified the suppression of past freedom, and therefore retained the possibility of irrational attraction. In this section, a summary of historical accounts of the rationalisation of the cancan is followed by an analysis of contemporary critiques of the precision kick-line made by André Levinson (1991), the Russian émigré dance critic who lived in Paris in the 1920s, and Kracauer (1995), the German cultural critic who wrote about the Tiller Girls in Berlin during the same period. In their analyses the cancan's mediation between notions of the irrational past and the rational present is expressed in the terms of evolutionary psychology made popular by Freud.

Both contemporary commentators (Levinson, 1991) and dance historians (Price, 1998; Camus, 2001a) have asserted a connection between the underwear-revealing kicks of the nineteenth-century cancan and those of the precision kick-line, but this transformation is not well documented. Most explanations, however, involve a series of transatlantic crossings between Europe and the United States. Some accounts (for example, Hardy, 1980), trace the origins of the chorus line to the theatrical spectacle The Black Crook which opened at Niblo's Garden in New York on 12<sup>th</sup> September 1866, and which included a section

danced by a “Great Parisienne Ballet Troupe” (programme note cited in Odom, 1982) composed of dancers from several European countries, described by Protestant minister Charles Smyth in the New York Clipper in terms similar to those used to critique the cancan in Paris:

The attitudes were exceedingly indelicate – ladies dancing so as to make their undergarments spring up, exposing the figure beneath from the waist to the toe, except for such covering as we have described; stretching out a foot so as to place the limb in a horizontal line drawn from the hip, and turning the foot thus held out towards the audience.

Smyth cited in Allen, 1991, 114

David Price (1998) notes that although it is unclear whether this number was a cancan in the original production, in later versions of the show it was billed as a Parisian Quadrille. The dancers were supplemented by a large number of American “auxiliary ladies” (programme note cited in Odom, 1982) who were employed locally as the production toured. Camille Hardy (Hardy, 1980) argues that the quick training of large numbers of untrained dancers required a focus on simple movements and precision, a strategy that was not new, but fostered a new aesthetic when combined with the movements of the cancan on such a large scale.

Two years later, the reworking of the cancan in the United States was catalysed by the touring of Lydia Thompson’s British Blondes to New York in 1868, making their debut in a play called Ixion, which included a parody of the cancan, sparking controversy and the development of American burlesque (Allen, 1991). According to Price (1998, 36), one of the first performances of the cancan on the London stage was by famous French Second Empire *cancaneuse*, Finette la

Bordelaise, in December 1867<sup>4</sup>, and Ixion may have parodied this performance. Robert Allen (1991) argues that American burlesque subsequently centred on what a contemporary commentator, Olive Logan, described in 1867 as “the leg business” (Logan cited in Allen, 1991, 148), an entertainment industry based on the revelation of legs as a symbol of female sexuality and the low.

The process through which the burlesquing and industrialisation of the cancan in the United States led to the wholesale changes in both its movement and connotations, is a subject that requires further primary research beyond the scope of this thesis. However, Allen notes that the burlesque leg business was amalgamated with the minstrel show format in the 1870s, including the semi-circular formation of the performers (Allen, 1991), which may have led to the linear formation of the chorus line. But by the time the leg business was reintroduced to Paris in the 1890s by the Barrison Sisters (Price, 1998; Mirambeau, 2004), a Danish family who had emigrated in 1886 to the United States where they devised their skirt-raising act, the dance had changed radically, described by a journalist for La Revue as a “mechanical toy waddle” (Price, 1998, 62)<sup>5</sup>. While the Parisian cancan of the 1890s often referred to the irrationality of the runaway machine, the mechanics of the new American chorus line erased individuality and improvisation, replicating identical movement across several performers who faced the audience in a line. During the same period, John Tiller, a Manchester cotton broker, was working, perhaps independently, on a similar, but more regimented precision kick-line, using young working-class girls, which would later tour Europe alongside the American troupes (Burt, 1998).

According to Price, when the Moulin Rouge reopened after the war in 1921, the cancan, which had been reduced to a theatrical novelty act after the dance-hall was converted into a theatre in 1903, regained popularity, but in a form that was clearly influenced by the precision kick-line. The choreographer at the Moulin Rouge during this time was Pierre Sandrini, who was trained in classical ballet, as were his dancers. As well as bringing the precision, multiplication of dancers, and linearity of the *corps de ballet* to the cancan, Sandrini also made explicit his borrowing from the version of the dance that had developed outside France, by labelling it using a term coined in Britain: 'French Cancan' (Price, 1998). The French Cancan was very different from the cancan that had developed in France in the nineteenth century. Instead of four dancers, one or more of which was frequently male, the French Cancan multiplied its dancers to eight or sixteen, and feminised them entirely. Rather than emphasising the personality, improvisation and innovation of the individual performer, the French Cancan foregrounded unison, precision, and the sublimation of the individual personality to the group. Furthermore, rather than performing on the dance floor in a loose quadrille formation, facing any direction they wished, the dancers performed on stage, in one or more lines, facing the audience. By 1928, when Levinson witnessed the transformed dance, it was, "a cancan stripped of its billowing skirts and surreptitious allusions" (Levinson, 1991, 90).

Kracauer (1995) and Levinson wrote about the precision kick-line in 1927 and 1928 respectively, the former referring to the Tiller Girls in Berlin, and the latter to various troupes of "girls" in Paris. Both the cultural critic and the dance critic

differentiate the new cancan from the nineteenth-century version by the lack of irrational, pathological, sexual attraction – what Freud described as a libidinal or erotic tie. Levinson notes that, “[i]n these young girls there is nothing in excess, except health and the consequent absence of everything morbid or passionate which might give them mystery” (Levinson, 1991, 93). Kracauer describes a mass ornament composed of “thousands of...sexless bodies....that no longer has any erotic meaning but at best points to the locus of the erotic” (Kracauer, 1995, 76-77). The 1920s cancan body, like the rational body, denied its involvement in reproductive, sexual processes that implied an open, unfinished body, and therefore reduced both the threat of infection, and the excitement of attraction, that had defined the nineteenth-century cancan.

Both Kracauer and Levinson identify the source of this desexualisation in the rationalising processes of mass production. Levinson argues that,

[t]he personality of the classic “girl” has been effaced, and a wholesale type, a stereotyped model has been multiplied to order. They are standardised products and they have no names but their trade-names: the Fisher Girls, the Tiller Girls, the Jackson Girls, etc.  
Levinson, 1991, 90

Kracauer similarly claims that the mass ornament, a category that includes spectacles performed in stadiums as well as the Tiller Girls, reflects “the *capitalist production process*” (1995, 78, original emphasis). He continues: “The hands in the factory correspond to the legs of the Tiller Girls.... The mass ornament is the aesthetic reflex of the rationality to which the prevailing economic system aspires” (1995, 79). However, Kracauer conceives of the effect of rationality on the body differently than nineteenth-century bourgeois critics of

the cancan. Whereas for the latter the rational body was whole, co-ordinated, bounded, for Kracauer,

[r]eason speaks wherever it disintegrates the organic unity and rips open the natural surface (no matter how cultivated the latter may be); it dissects the human form here only so that the undistorted truth can fashion man anew.

Kracauer, 1995, 84

Therefore, the Tiller Girls, having embodied rationality, “can no longer be reassembled into human beings after the fact.... Arms, thighs, and other segments are the smallest component parts of the composition” (Kracauer, 1995, 77-78). Kracauer’s conception of rationality appears to perform the fragmentation of the body that had been attributed to irrationality in the nineteenth century.

As Ramsay Burt (1998) points out, Kracauer’s mass ornament can be conceived as a collection of “docile bodies”, to use Michel Foucault’s terminology. For Foucault, “[a] body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved” (Foucault, 1991, 136). This is achieved through the internalisation of control over the body’s movements, so that imperatives of spatial and temporal efficiency become a personal discipline, rather than the effect of external force. As a body that regulates its own repression, “[a] docile body is more useful to capitalist production than a robot or automaton” (Burt, 1998, 116), and indeed the cancan’s shift from the irrationality of the runaway automaton to the docility of the mass ornament partly reflects the permeation of capitalist mass production through French society in the early twentieth century.

However, Foucault's notion of docility also differs from the mass ornament in certain respects. Discipline, in Foucault's framework is "a question not of treating the body *en masse*, 'wholesale', as if it were an indissociable unity, but of working it 'retail', individually" (Foucault, 1991). Perhaps this is because Foucault conceived the notion of docile bodies in relation to eighteenth-century institutions, rather than twentieth century mass culture. By contrast, for Kracauer the rational fragmentation of bodies allows isolated limbs to be co-ordinated at a higher level of organisation. Using the model of the production line, Kracauer writes that in the mass ornament, "[e]veryone does his or her task on the conveyor belt, performing a partial function without grasping the totality" (1995, 78). The Tiller Girls are "no longer individual girls, but indissoluble girl clusters" (1995, 75-76), whose personalities are subsumed by the group. Whereas irrational fragmentation allowed a democratisation of control throughout the body, rational fragmentation denies localised control of body parts, necessitating the centralisation of power over a group of segmented bodies. Kracauer aligns this use of rationality as a tool for maximising productivity with the scientific management of Frederick Winslow Taylor (1856-1915), whose time-motion studies broke down work tasks into a series of timed movements. Although, as Burt (1998) points out, there is no evidence that the British Tiller Girls were influenced by American Taylorism, they may well have been exposed to the parallel European science of work (see Rabinbach, 1990), and Taylor's principles may have shaped the American precision kick-lines.

For Kracauer, the rationality of the mass ornament gives it liberatory potential. In a complete reversal of the association between the irrational body and revolution



in nineteenth-century France, Kracauer credits rational thinking, at least in part, for the revolutions in Europe since 1789. This liberatory potential derives from the capacity of reason to counter the irrational religious beliefs that place man in thrall to natural and supernatural powers. Kracauer conceives of history as a struggle between reason and these irrational forces, exemplified by the French Enlightenment. He therefore reproduces the Enlightenment conviction that reason would free mankind from enslavement to the illusions of religion, bringing liberation through truth.

However, Kracauer contends that the mass ornament only partially embodies this rational utopia. He argues that the capitalist rationality (the “*Ratio*”) reflected in the mass ornament, is “a murky reason” that “rationalises not too much but rather *too little*” (1995, 81, original emphasis). The mass ornament therefore takes on the form of reason, while its content remains irrational: “Viewed from the perspective of reason, the mass ornament reveals itself as a mythological cult that is masquerading in the garb of abstraction” (1995, 83). While it has lost the symbolic power of the religious cult, the mass ornament nevertheless inhibits the liberation of the masses from irrationality by inducing what Kracauer calls “distraction” (1995, 75): “the production and mindless consumption of the ornamental patterns divert them from the imperative to change the reigning order” (1995, 85). This notion is reminiscent of the hypnotic, pathological effect attributed to the mechanised body, in both live dance and film, in the late nineteenth century (see previous chapter). However, whereas the mindlessness induced by the mechanical other was frequently interpreted as a liberation, albeit a dangerous one, from the restrictions of rational, bourgeois life in the *fin de*

*siècle*, for Kracauer, distraction prolongs the enslavement of the masses to irrationality.

Levinson also senses irrationality beneath the rational surface of the precision kick-line, but for him it is a primitive presence. After describing the grace of the chorus line as “animal”, Levinson continues:

And if the game grows human, though ever so little, the charming zoo is transformed suddenly into a great Negro tam-tam, ebullient with savage geniality and a rhythmic geyser spurting into syncopations and glissandi.

Levinson, 1991, 93

Levinson evokes the latent irrationality, represented by black dance, that resides in precision kick-line, ready to burst forth at any moment. A similar image is conveyed by Paul Colin in his 1927 lithograph of the satirist and critic Georges Thenon, known as ‘Rip’, watching three cancaning monkeys (Figure 15).

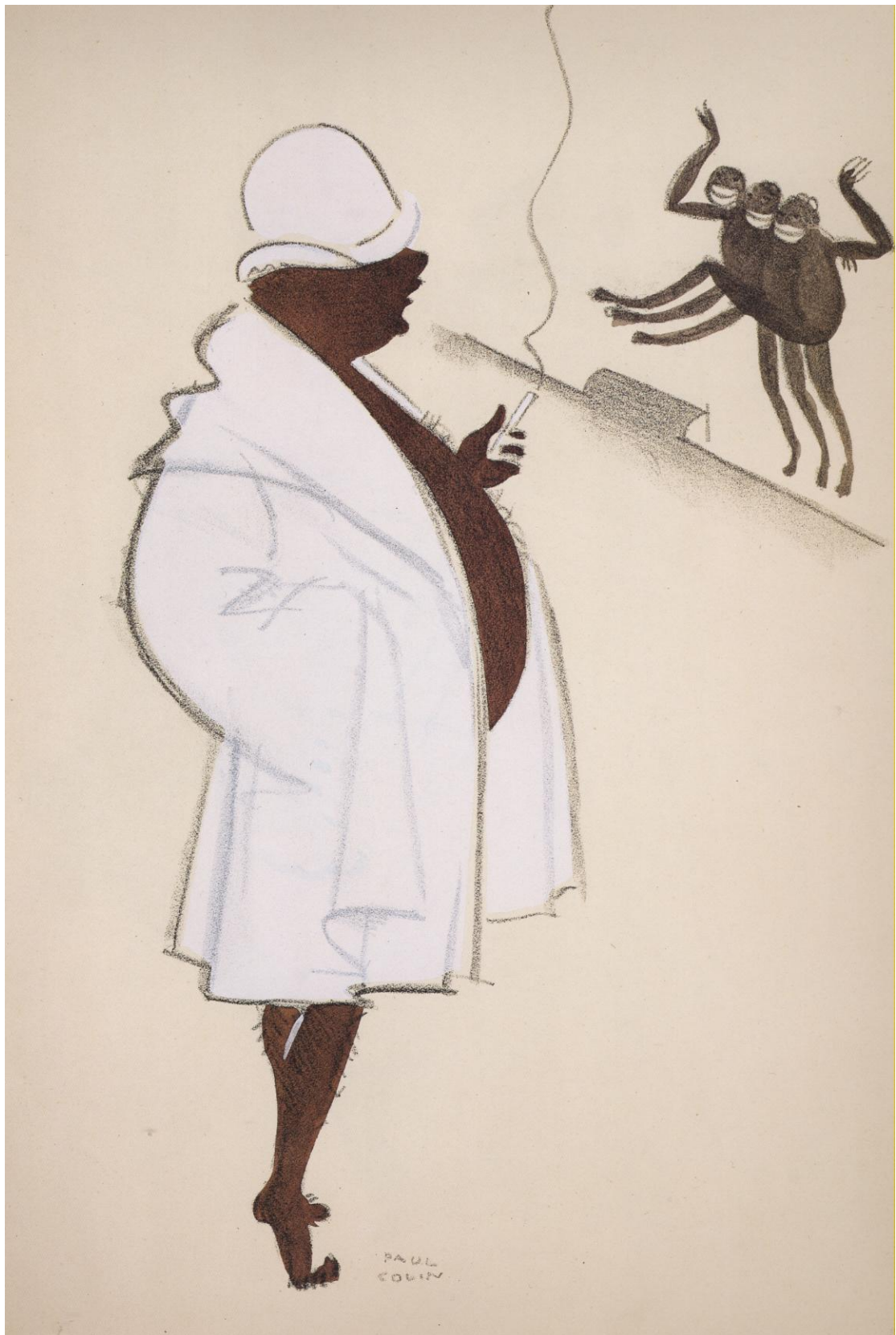


Figure 15: Lithograph of Rip watching cancaning monkeys (slightly cropped) by Paul Colin  
from *Le Tumulte Noir*. Reproduced in Gates Jnr. and Dalton (1998)

According to McCarren (2003), Rip had described the fashion for black dance in 1920s Paris as a “Charentonesque epidemic” (Thenon cited in McCarren, 2003, 175), referring to the Charenton asylum, in his preface to the 1927 edition of Colin’s *Le Tumulte Noir* portfolio of lithographs. For Rip, the black dancing body exhibited an irrationality that held a dangerous but compulsive attraction for the rational spectator. Colin’s depiction of Rip implies that watching mechanical, apparently unconscious, and therefore primitive movements of cancan dancers, provoked the same ambivalent response, as Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Karen Dalton suggest in the new preface to the 1988 edition:

Rip... the critic, stands in the theatre and watches the show. Though he too is brown-skinned and wears a bowler hat, and therefore has not totally escaped the effects of the black craze, he nonetheless has maintained some distance, some reason. And what does he see onstage? Three thick-lipped, grinning monkeys doing the cancan. The ambivalence is undeniable.

Gates Jnr. and Dalton, 1998, 11

Colin stripped away the rational façade of the 1920s cancan to reveal the contagious spectacle beneath. Furthermore, he appears to mock Rip’s pretentious attempt to protect his rationality from infection. In the other lithographs in *Le Tumulte Noir*, Colin emphasises the irrational, grotesque features of the bodies of black dancers such as Josephine Baker, depicting their energy and disregard for rational European bodily norms as liberating<sup>6</sup>. Colin and Levinson, unlike Kracauer, saw positive value in the cancan’s irrational undercurrent, particularly for rational Europeans:

Now, often these lithe American girls, in their radiant youth, though their race is without memories, re-discover, beyond the centuries, beyond all civilisations, something indefinable and ancient, which we Europeans will never recover.

Levinson, 1991, 94

This indefinable something is precisely the irrational, captivating, pathological/mechanical quality that Levinson and Colin associate with the black dance epidemic, and that Kracauer associates with irrational beliefs:

For they [the ‘girls’] are pure symbol, the living image of our life, which substitutes for the glamor of the mind and the quest of the sublime the *worship of biological forces and mechanical forces*.

Levinson, 1991, 94, emphasis added

Levinson, Colin and Kracauer all agree that the precision kick-line has a compulsive quality that transcends a mere embodiment of mass production. What they disagree on is the value of this allure: for Kracauer it is a distraction from rational revolution, whereas for Levinson and Colin it liberates the European spectator from restrictive rationality.

Whereas the nineteenth-century cancan generated its attraction either through the direct embodiment of irrationality, or through the embodiment of the runaway machine, the cancan of the 1920s revealed the irrational attraction that lay hidden within rationality itself. Emile Vuillermoz, the film and cinema critic, expressed this paradoxical characteristic of the chorus line in 1933:

Despite their personal grace, these charming performers have become only anonymous cells in a fabulous animal body, a sort of gigantic centipede in raptures. One observes, with satisfaction, this precision machine, with levers, wheels, pistons and connecting rods, so perfectly regulated, with its so well oiled joints. Its is transfigured,

exalted and idealised by the décor, costumes, light, music and the hallucinating grey that emanates from certain machines in full action, *from which it is impossible to look away*, when one has imprudently observed their delicate and precise gestures.

Vuillermoz cited in Guido, 2006, 146-47, emphasis added

As Laurent Guido (2006) points out, Vuillermoz identifies a powerful attraction emanating from within the rational machine of the precision kick-line, that compels the spectator to look, in spite of his/her rational judgement.

Kracauer, Levinson, Colin and Vuillermoz all describe or depict the 1920s cancan using variations on the model of group psychology articulated by Freud. The cancan, like the modern psyche, achieves an appearance of rationality by repressing its irrational past. However, by suppressing individuality, the chorus line causes a regression to the primitive, irrational body, which Colin and Levinson characterise as degeneration into the contagious realm of black dance. The performance of these primitive bodies appeals to the spectator's unconscious, inducing, in turn, their regression to an irrational state that Kracauer calls distraction, and Vuillermoz describes in terms of compulsion. The cancan embodied, and provoked in the audience, the Freudian emergence of irrationality from beneath the surface of the rational.

However, just as Freud's psychological theories point towards phenomena that we would now interpret as cultural and historical, these descriptions and depictions of the cancan can be read on a social level. The 1920s cancan manifested a repression, not of a primitive psychological stage, but of its nineteenth-century incarnation as explicitly irrational. And if this repression ruptured, it was not evolutionary history that burst through, but the cancan's

nineteenth-century history. Similarly, the spectator's captivation was a symptom not of a return to the unconscious, but of a return to a discredited, nineteenth-century mode of spectatorship, now considered primitive. The tension in French mass culture between modern rationality and the supposed irrationality of its nineteenth-century past, was embodied in the cancan as a struggle between its present and past forms. But contemporary commentators on the dance could not escape from the terms of evolutionary psychology with which this cultural crisis was framed at the time. A similar battle was concurrently taking place in avant-garde film, a battle that would come to be discussed using metaphors of dance, pointing towards ways in which dance on film might escape the linear evolutionary paradigm in the 1930s.

#### **4.4: The Re-emergence of the Cinema of Attractions**

The cancan's return to popularity paralleled the re-emergence in film of the aesthetic of attractions, reworked into a new form, during and following the First World War. As several theorists have noted (Gunning, 1990, 1995a; Gordon, 2001a; Guido, 2006), the attraction became central to the revolutionary aesthetics of avant-garde film in the 1920s. This return to the irrational aesthetics of cinema's early years created a context within which the newly rationalised cancan would reappear on film, as a signifier of cinema's struggle with its own past, in the second half of the 1920s.

Rae Beth Gordon (2001a) has argued that the epileptic aesthetic, used as an attraction in live cabaret performance in late nineteenth-century France, was

incorporated not only into the cinema of attractions, but also into the narrative cinema that followed it, by artists who moved from stage to screen, such as Charlie Chaplin (1889-1977)<sup>7</sup>. Chaplin created his most famous character, called ‘the Tramp’ in Britain and the United States and ‘Charlot’ in France, by drawing on the irrational physical aesthetic of the music hall and the clown. Gordon notes Chaplin’s influence on avant-garde filmmakers of the 1920s, such as French director Jean Epstein (1897-1953) and the Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein (1898-1948). These filmmakers were inspired by the way in which Chaplin’s mechanical movements could elicit physical sensations of shock or laughter in a distant audience, through the medium of film. Epstein claimed that,

[f]ilm is nothing but a relay between the source of nervous energy and the auditorium.... Chaplin has created the overwrought hero....a synopsis of... photogenic neurasthenia.

Epstein cited in Gordon, 2001a, 515

By using the film camera to harness the pathological relationship between performer and spectator, these filmmakers created an aesthetic of shock that drew on the nineteenth-century revolutionary connotations of the irrational body, but made them appear modern and vanguard. Blaise Cendrars, the Swiss novelist and poet based in Paris, described this new film aesthetic in 1926 as,

Automatism. Psychism. And it is the machine that... at last uncovers the sources of feeling.... The image lies at the primitive sources of emotion.... The spectator is no longer immobile in his armchair; [he is] ripped out of it, done violence to, participates in the action, [and] recognizes himself on the screen among the convulsions of the shouting, protesting, and frantically agitated crowd.

Cendrars cited in Gordon, 2001a, 540



The film lens had the capacity to transmit, and even magnify, the effects of irrational movement on the spectator's body, but also to control and direct this effect towards either revolutionary ideals or revolutionary aesthetics. For example, Eisenstein's notion of the 'Montage of Attractions', influenced by the irrational aesthetics of Chaplin, French comedians, the music-hall and the circus, represented an attempt to harness the power of the irrational relationship between performer and spectator for ideological purposes in post-revolutionary Russia<sup>8</sup>:

An attraction... is... any element of the theatre that subjects the spectator to a sensual or psychological impact, experimentally regulated and mathematically calculated to produce in him certain emotional shocks which, when placed in their proper sequence within the totality of the production, become the only means that enable the spectator to perceive the ideological side of what is being demonstrated – the ultimate ideological *conclusion*.

Eisenstein, 1974, 78, original emphasis

Although originally formulated in 1923 as a theatrical technique, Eisenstein soon applied this new approach to his early film work. In film, his notion of montage could be rendered even more effectively, by using editing to juxtapose images in a linear sequence.

In the same year, Eisenstein's teacher, Nikolai Foregger (1892-1939), a pioneer in Soviet theatre and dance during the post-revolutionary Constructivist period (1920-1924), premiered his most famous live dance work The Dance of the Machines, described by Mel Gordon as “[e]ssentially a revue of various machines portraying the industrial process, each group enacting the movements of gears, levers, fly-wheels, motors, etc.” (Gordon, 1975, 72). Like Eisenstein, Foregger sought to appropriate the mass aesthetics of popular entertainment for

mass politics, creating a “music hall in proletarian attire” (Foregger cited in Gordon, 1975, 71), but he combined this with an embodiment of machine culture reminiscent of the Italian Futurists<sup>9</sup>. He wrote in 1926 that, “[o]ur life creates dances of the sidewalks and speeding automobiles, and renders homage to the precision of machine functions, the quickness of flowing crowds, and the grandeur of skyscrapers” (Foregger, 1975, 75). This conflation of mass production and mass entertainment produced a performance that paralleled contemporary developments in the cancan, as Gordon notes:

Striving to perfect every dance movement and gesture of the dancers until each acrobatic group resembled the inner workings of some complex piece of machinery, Foregger was able to achieve something that not only rivaled [sic] twenties precision dancers, like the Tiller Girls, but a uniquely proletarian spectacle.

Gordon, 1975, 71

Recognising that cinema provided a powerful means for the mechanisation, mass production, and mass consumption of dance, Foregger predicted that, “[t]he future is for the dance and film” (Foregger, 1975, 77).

The following year in France, the artist Fernand Léger (1881-1955) created the film *Ballet Mécanique* (1924), a rapid-fire montage of unrelated images of people and mechanical objects, which cited Eisenstein’s endorsement in its opening intertitle, but aimed towards an aesthetic revolution rather than a political one. Léger wrote in an article on the film: “Fifty girls’ thighs rolling with discipline, projected in a close-up, this is beautiful, this is objectivity” (Léger cited in Guido, 2006, 146). For Léger, the close-up of the precision kick-

line encapsulated the controlled attraction, the containment and channelling of irrationality, that constituted radical, modern aesthetics.

This use of visual technology to harness the irrational attraction is reminiscent of Fuller's rationalisation of the female dancing body, and indeed both Gunning (2003) and Laurent Guido (2006) note Fuller's influence on post-war French avant-garde filmmakers<sup>10</sup>. These artists were inspired not just by Fuller's live work, but by her later experiments with film. In *Le Lys de la Vie* (1921), an film adaptation of a live dancework of the same name that Fuller had choreographed in 1920, rational and irrational elements interpenetrate, although perhaps not as seamlessly as in the majority of her earlier stage work (see section 2.8). Ann Cooper Albright comments that,

For a contemporary viewer used to films that suture the close-up shots, sounds, and other effects together into a seamless narrative, *Le lys de la vie* seems disjointed at first. Because the astonishing effects often take precedence over the development of the story, Fuller's film can be situated in between the early cinema of attractions analysed by Tom Gunning and the later crystallization of a smooth narrative form in film.

Albright, 2007, 197

Fuller's use of cinematic technology to create both rational and irrational effects chimed with the efforts of contemporary avant-garde filmmakers to create a new, controlled cinema of attractions.

While Fuller's film depicted technologised dancing bodies, other avant-garde filmmakers attempted to incorporate the aesthetic of the controlled attraction into their work through the notion of dancing images, animated through their non-

narrative, syncopated editing. Guido contends that the rationalised dancing body became a model for film editing in the 1920s and 1930s. However, this choice of metaphor reveals a tension in avant-garde film of this period. If the 1920s dancing body signified the presence of the irrational within the rational, then its comparison with film editing highlighted the contradictory impulses which had characterised visual technologies since the nineteenth century, but which seemed to collide in 1920s cinema: the impulse to get closer to the irrational body, and the impulse to rationally separate oneself from it.

The tension between these two impulses is reflected in the recommendations for the relationship between dance and film editing made during this period. For example, Levinson allied montage editing with the irrational connotations of dance by advising in 1929 that film should, “suggest the vertiginous whirling and ecstatic stamping of dance with the help of peculiar practices” such as, “the illusion obtained by the frequent shot alteration and the eloquent enlarging of big close-ups” (Levinson cited in Guido, 2006, 149). However, Georges Pomiès, an actor for Jean Renoir in the early 1930s, suggested that cinema should adopt the rational economy of dance, claiming in 1939 that, “[t]he superior shape of cinema is not simply to make movement, but to make images dance. One sees what a lesson and efficient contours the dance of the human body could bring to realize this concept” (Pomiès cited in Guido, 2006, 149). Alternatively, Epstein proposed in 1926 that both rational and irrational elements are desirable: “An intelligent editing will reconstitute [...] the life of dance, both according to the spectator and the dancer, objective and subjective” (Epstein cited in Guido, 2006, 150).

Beneath this argument about the relationship between dance and film lay a more uncomfortable struggle: cinema's battle with its own history. The cinema of attractions, associated with the irrationality of the dancing machine, had been cast as the primitive childhood of film, superseded and repressed by rational, narrative cinema. However, in the 1920s the *avant garde* had rehabilitated the aesthetic of attractions, using the film lens to channel the irrational towards specific ideological or aesthetic ends. As with the chorus line, there was disagreement over the value of this re-emergence of the irrational. The battle between the rationality of the present and the persistent irrationality of the past was played out in films of the second half of the 1920s, through the dancing images of montage editing and the dancing bodies of the cancan.

#### **4.5: The Cancan in The Phantom of the Moulin Rouge (1925)**

The cancan had lost popularity as a subject for filmmakers since the rise of narrative film, but in the late 1920s, the realignment of the cancan's connotations with contemporary cinematic issues, led to a spate of films featuring the dance. The first of these films was René Clair's *Le Fantôme du Moulin-Rouge* (1925), which was released in Britain as *The Phantom of the Moulin Rouge*; the latter is the version that will be analysed here. It will be argued in this section that the cancan and montage editing emerge in this film at moments of narrative crisis, to suggest the internal conflict between rationality and irrationality taking place in the mind of the protagonist, and in the film itself.

Clair had direct experience of the confluence of the concerns of dance and film in the 1920s. In 1920 he had starred in *Le Lys de la Vie*, a film co-directed by Fuller, in which a range of cinematic techniques, such as chromatic colouring, slow motion and negative printing, were applied to dance (Guido, 2006). He then turned to directing, and in 1924 made *Entr'acte*, a short film based on a scenario outlined by the Dadaist Francis Picabia, to be screened in the interval between the two acts of Picabia's 'instantanéist' ballet, *Relâche*, performed by the Swedish Ballet Suédois. For Picabia, whose work had previously been confined to visual art, the attraction of dance and film was their ability to overcome the static nature of the artwork, and therefore to embody the radical ephemerality that defined *L'Instantanéisme*, his variation on Dadaism, of which he claimed, "[i]t is not a movement. It is the perpetual movement!" (anon., 2002a [online]). *Entr'acte*, featuring Picabia, Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, Eric Satie (who also composed the music), and members of the Ballet Suédois, drew on the Dadaist celebration of irrationality as a weapon against bourgeois aesthetics, using cinematic techniques such as superimposition within a series of intercut, surreal, semi-narrative sequences, such as a ballerina filmed through a glass floor, and then shown bearded. For both Clair and Picabia, dance and film shared the capacity to reveal what lay beneath the ballerina's skirts, overturning rational conventions of gender and narrativity.

Clair's embrace of avant-garde cinematic methods, and of the interpenetration of dance and film, may reflect his conviction, revealed in his writings of 1923 and 1924, that cinema needed to return to the non-narrative concerns of its early years. He stated in 1923,

[t]he creators of the first films, at the turn of the century, were not mistaken. The error arose in 1908 with the first adaptation of stage plays.... It would be interesting to link up again with the tradition of 1900.

Clair, 1972, 34-35

The aspects of early cinema that Clair wished to revive were those elements that led to its rejection as primitive, and that betrayed its continuity with the irrational aesthetic of nineteenth-century dance. He articulated this in 1924:

If there is an esthetic of the cinema, it was discovered at the same time as the movie camera and the film, in France, by the Lumière Brothers. It can be summed up in one word: motion. Outward motion of objects perceived by the eye, to which we would add today the inner motion of the unfolding story. From the union of these two motions there can arise the phenomenon so often spoken of and so seldom perceived: rhythm. If we want the cinema to grow and thrive, let us respect this forgotten tradition, let us return to this source.

Clair, 1972, 35

Clair sought to resurrect the radical aesthetics that dance forms such as the cancan had embodied in the nineteenth century, that the cinema of attractions had mechanically reproduced, and that avant-garde filmmakers were beginning to appropriate through editing and the notion of the attraction.

Both the cancan and cinematic techniques of montage editing and superimposition, appear in Clair's first feature-length film, The Phantom of the Moulin Rouge (1925). However, the feature-length format led Clair to adopt narrative conventions that were absent from his previous short films (Entr'acte and Paris Qui Dort [1924]). The narrative follows the temptation of the central protagonist, Julien Boissel, into irrational hedonism, and his eventual

“resurrection”, a plot clearly influenced by Christian mythology and rationalist morality. However, this narrative is constructed around a series of Eisensteinian attractions: a cancan number intercut with Julien’s temptation; Julien’s manifestation as a ghost, using techniques of superimposition; and a montage-edited chase sequence. This creates a tension in the film between the rationalism espoused by the narrative, and the irrational devices through which the story is told. This tension is played out in the narrative itself through Julien’s internal conflict between the pleasures of irrational escape, and the benefits of rational restraint. The cancan appears precisely at the moment when this conflict first arises, alternately embodying rationality and irrationality, freedom and enslavement. Paradoxically, this conflict can only be resolved by rejecting the value of the very irrational aesthetics that Clair, a year earlier, had championed, and around which the film is structured.

Julien’s descent into the irrational is prompted by the news that his girlfriend’s father has forbidden their marriage. In his despair he visits the Moulin Rouge, constructed in the intertitle as an escape from the pressures and obligations of rational, bourgeois life: “So Julien dressed up and went to the Palace of Forgetfulness, where laughter is the password – where Gaiety and Buffoonery drives [sic] the cares of the day away”. The scene is set with a cancan performed by sixteen dancers in long, 1890s-style skirts, who execute a choreographed routine in linear formations such as lines and squares. The camera largely views the spectacle from an elevated position to one side of the dancers, as if from a balcony over the dance floor, capturing the geometric floor patterns (Busby Berkeley, who developed the technique of filming from a position directly above



the dancers, will be discussed later in this chapter). The regimentation of the dancers and the distant vantage point of the camera, allow the viewer to maintain a rational separation from the action, suggesting Julien's preoccupation with his dilemma, and resistance to the surrounding hedonism; the intertitle describes him as, "[s]triving blindly to drive away despair – taunted by the mocking blare of music and laughter around him".

Eventually Julien is approached by "Dr Renault, an eminent brain specialist and, amongst other things, a student of psychology"<sup>11</sup>. In the context of the popular interest in psychoanalysis in the 1920s, this description might have evoked Freud's studies of the unconscious. Indeed, the subsequent intertitle depicts the underworld of the Moulin Rouge as a laboratory for the study of the primitive unconscious: "Often he comes to the Moulin Rouge --- watching; hearing; studying his fellow creatures at play --- for him this was one of Life's Museums – a veritable feast of study". Renault asks Julien, "Will you let me make a suggestion-?", perhaps conjuring Freud's use of the word to indicate the external influences to which the unconscious is vulnerable. The content of the suggestion, however, is not revealed, and instead the camera cuts to a second cancan. In this routine, the dancers are dressed in short, tunic-style dresses, and dance in two lines with their arms around each other's shoulders. At first the camera is positioned behind the audience, but it then switches to a close-up, panning down the dancer's bodies and lingering on the legs, which kick and rotate from the knee. The seduction of the dancer's bodies, to which the camera exposes the viewer, mirrors Julien's seduction by Renault, and when we return to their conversation, Julien nods in agreement to the mysterious offer. The irresistible

attraction of the seemingly rationalised cancan, embodies the capacity of the rational scientist to enslave Julien's unconscious mind, exposing the ease with which the thin veneer of rationality can be broken.

A final cancan ensues, amidst balloons and streamers. However, this initially celebratory atmosphere grows increasingly unsettling, as the streamers wind around the dancers, obscuring their bodies and inhibiting their freedom of movement. The camera cuts between Julien, Renault's eyes, the increasingly constrained dancers and the streamer-festooned sails of the Moulin Rouge windmill turning. The mesmerising effects of montage editing on the viewer suggest Julien's hypnosis by Renault, but the bondage of the dancers already implies that Renault's apparent offer of an escape from life's problems is in fact a form of enslavement. Eventually the windmill sails disappear into darkness as Julien submits his conscious will to Renault.

It transpires that Renault had offered to perform an experiment in which he would release Julien's soul from his body. Julien's soul takes the form of a phantom, rendered on film through superimposition, which is "[f]ree to drift on the buoyant wings of fancy – untrammelled by earthly cares, seeking out only those places where Laughter and Joy hold sway". Julien becomes pure irrationality, causing uncanny occurrences (such as the disappearance of coats from the cloakroom of the Moulin Rouge), and desecrating the canons of high art by defacing the Mona Lisa. Ironically, however, the phantom that creates such mischief is not Julien but cinema itself<sup>12</sup>. Similarly, Anne Friedberg (1993, 100) observes that in Clair's 1923 short film, *Paris Qui Dort* (*The Crazy Ray*), a

scientist invents an invisible ray that reproduces cinema's capacity to stop, fast forward and reverse motion, visualising cinema's effect on narrative. Reviving the magical effects of Georges Méliès' (1861-1938) films, Clair used editing to make the impossible possible, the irrational rational, a transformation that constituted an attraction by subverting the physical laws of the real world<sup>13</sup>.

When Julien's phantasmic/phantasmagoric soul spins above the dancers of the Moulin Rouge in the final scene of this sequence, Clair demonstrates cinema's inheritance of the cancan's spectacular trick of making the irrational physically manifest (on the phantasmagoria see chapter 3, footnote 12).

Clair locates cinematic irrationalism in an avant-garde context by depicting the phantom's visit to "The underground Eccentric Bar", where Dadaist eccentrics play chequers with dinner plates. Like the Moulin Rouge, the Eccentric Bar is constructed as the irrational underbelly of the rational world, signified by its decoration with modern primitivist sculpture and design. It is here, however, that Julien begins to realise that in his ghostly form he cannot enjoy the real-world pleasures of union with his girlfriend, Yvonne. He acknowledges the choice he must make between the freedom and triviality of irrational hedonism, and the rights and responsibilities of rational existence: "To return to my earthly state is to return to those earthly cares which I have so gladly shaken off". Ultimately Julien decides to return to the world where he is reunited with Yvonne, an ending described by a journalist within the film as Julien's "Resurrection".

In The Phantom, the cancan embodies Julien's psychological conflict between rationality and irrationality, but also the contemporary cinematic conflict

between narrative and attraction. Until Julien enters the Moulin Rouge, the narrative follows a rational course. However, the Moulin Rouge is the site not only of Julien's regression into the primitive unconscious, but of the film's apparent regression into its repressed past, the cinema of attractions. Julien's hypnotism signals the film's shift into a mode of presentation based on mesmerising the spectator with the spectacle of the irrational body, created cinematically or through dance, rather than narrative progression. In the third cancan, the primacy of the narrative is broken by a montage of shots in which the freedom of the dancers' bodies from rational norms, and the freedom of the camera from the slower rhythm of the preceding narrative, are juxtaposed with the gradual restriction of the dancers' movement and the threat of manipulation of Julien's and the spectator's will through hypnosis; the descent into the irrational is rendered ambivalently as a moment of both liberation and enslavement. In the subsequent sequence, the irrational reigns, as the phantom, a spectre of the cinema of attractions, roams the streets of Paris, revelling in the cinema's capacity to create uncanny effects. However, the ghost's return to the Moulin Rouge where he indulges in the giddy whirling of the dancers, directly precedes his recognition of the drawbacks of irrationality at the Eccentric Bar, after which narrative and spectacle alternate as Julien struggles to reunite his body and soul. As he chooses a rational life and is 'resurrected' by his rejection of the irrational, the film achieves closure by returning to narrative.

The film appears to stage narrative cinema's battle with its own repressed history in the cinema of attractions, represented by the stifled kicks of the 1920s cancan, spliced into the narrative through montage editing. This struggle is conceived in

Freudian terms, as a regression into the primitive irrationality of the unconscious, followed by the reassertion of rational, conscious order. The cinematic deployment of the cancan and montage editing at key moments of conflict between rationality and irrationality, narrative and attraction, present and past, was not unique to The Phantom in the late 1920s. The British film Moulin Rouge (1928) also used the cancan in this way, and the criticism that it received in the British press will serve in the next section to highlight the contradictions of this filmic method of dealing with the tension between narrative and attraction.

#### **4.6: The Cancan in Moulin Rouge (1928)**

Moulin Rouge was a British International Picture made at Elstree in London, directed by E.A. Dupont, a German director who had recently arrived in Britain after gaining international success with the German production Variété (1925) (Higson, 1999). The plot revolves around a young couple, André and Margaret, whose romance is jeopardised when André falls in love with Margaret's mother, Parysia, who is a dancer at the Moulin Rouge. The cancan is briefly featured twice in the film, at the beginning and near the end, in both cases as part of an attention-grabbing montage. In this section it is argued that the cancan sequences in Moulin Rouge, and British criticism of the film, draw on popular Freudian fears about the re-emergence of the irrational, and therefore pre-empt the cultural critiques of mass culture developed by European intellectuals in the 1930s, analysed in the following section.

The first instance of the cancan is in the opening sequence. The intertitle “Paris – City of Temptation”, announces that the film is to begin not in narrative mode, as in The Phantom, but with a montage of attractions. Images of the Eiffel Tower by night and city lights are set to jazz music. A shot of the exterior of the Moulin Rouge is followed by glimpses of various acts: a young, black boy playing the banjo, a Japanese theatre scene, acrobats, belly dancers, and a line of cancan girls. The cancan is immediately constructed, like Paris itself, as an exotic attraction. The routines are increasingly intercut with shots of the spectators in the auditorium, whose physical reactions, ranging from mild diversion to shock, confirm the irrationality of the spectacle. Parysia enters the stage, bedecked in jewels, clearly the star attraction. She is watched by Margaret and André in the audience. This establishes the dynamic of the film: Parysia’s exotic attraction persistently disrupts the conventional narrative romance between Margaret and André. The cancan is part of a seductive theatrical world that André must resist if his real-world relationship is not to be, in Parysia’s words, “contaminated by the stage”.

The cancan returns at the dramatic climax of the film. André’s failed suicide attempt has resulted in Margaret unwittingly driving a car with loosened brakes, and crashing into a tree. Aware that her daughter’s life hangs in the balance, and wracked with guilt at her seduction of André, Parysia must nevertheless perform her act at the Moulin Rouge. She faints and then awakens in a hysterical fit in her dressing room. Jazz music strikes up, and as the stagehands attempt to restrain her, the camera cuts away first to the surgery in which Margaret is undergoing a life-saving operation, and then to a line of identical, faceless, cancaning legs on

the stage of the Moulin Rouge. The choreographed inevitability of the rising and falling legs, and the rhythmic jazz music, suggest the compulsion of the attraction-producing theatrical machine to which Parysia is harnessed<sup>14</sup>. As the staff attempt to prepare the dazed Parysia for her performance, the camera returns several times to the kickline before she is pushed onto the stage to dance surrounded by a chorus of blackface minstrels. She staggers through her act, the circle of minstrels closing in on her, and then faints into the arms of the blackface chorus who carry her off to rapturous applause. Just as the cancan stages the hysterical body, her hysteria has become a spectacle. She appears to be trapped in a world in which bodies are made grotesque, whether by the cancan's isolation of limbs, the caricaturing of the blackface minstrel, or, in Parysia's case, by despair, and are then exhibited as attractions. As Margaret recovers, it becomes clear that André must reject this world, represented not just by the Moulin Rouge but by Paris itself, if he is to save his relationship with Margaret. Parysia tells him, "You have been given the opportunity to redeem yourself". Like Julien in The Phantom, André seizes his chance of resurrection and leaves Paris on a train with Margaret. Parysia, however, remains enslaved; she begins her performance again and the Moulin Rouge windmill sails turn.

As in The Phantom, Moulin Rouge participates in the very irrational aesthetics that its narrative decries. While the plot critiques the mechanical, grotesque, enslaving qualities of the Moulin Rouge and Paris, the film nevertheless reproduces these irrational strategies: the camera's close-up reinforces the fragmentation of the cancan dancers' bodies, the surgical incision of Margaret's body becomes merely another attraction in the montage, and Parysia's hysteria is

a spectacle for the audience outside the film, as well as the one within it. This contradiction was not lost on contemporary critics. Andrew Higson (1999) notes that British reviews criticised the film for failing to integrate the visual attractions into the narrative, complaining that the former, “tediously pad out a wholly inadequate plot” (anon. cited in Higson, 1999, 281). Furthermore, some critics associated the film’s aesthetic of attractions with the “International” claims of its production company (Higson, 1999; “C.M.” no date), its Parisian setting, or its German director, but deemed it inappropriate for British audiences: “Moulin Rouge should please Continental audiences who like this kind of erotic nonsense” but it is, “the most un-British film ever made in Britain” (anon. cited in Higson, 1999, 282). One reviewer characterised the whole film as one long cancan, claiming that it was, “at base a leg show” (anon. cited in Higson, 1999, 281), seducing its audience like the shows at the Moulin Rouge. The irrationalism of Moulin Rouge was contrasted with, “the swift, efficient narrative drive of contemporary American cinema” (Higson, 1999, 282) – a rational approach to which these critics hoped British film would aspire. Moulin Rouge’s moralising narrative could not mask the aesthetic of attractions that lay at its core.

These critics pointed out the disturbing current of irrationality that ran beneath the rational narrative of Moulin Rouge, and thereby, unwittingly, highlight the influence of Freudian notions of the rational and irrational in both Moulin Rouge and The Phantom, and in their own analyses. The cautionary depiction of a rational, male protagonist succumbing to the “City of Temptation” in Moulin Rouge and The Phantom, and the critical condemnation of the aesthetic of



temptation in Moulin Rouge, all echo Freud's definition of the uncanny as that which tempts the rational individual to slide into irrationality. Freud (1945, 125) equated the loss of rational will to the hypnotist with the experience of being in love, since both are based on a libidinal, irrational bond that dissolves the boundaries of the ego, and indeed both Julien's hypnotism and André's desire for Paris/Parysia lead to similar narratives of regression into a repressed realm of the primitive unconscious, made manifest in the underworld locations of the Eccentric Bar and the Moulin Rouge. These underworlds point towards the filmic past in the cinema of attractions, in which the cancan and other dances mesmerised the spectator. The cancan performs the same uncanny function in Moulin Rouge and The Phantom, luring the spectator both inside and outside the film into an irrational mode of reception that must later be repressed. Just as Freud (1954) explained the presence of irrationality in the rational mind through the notion of regression, these films justify their use of the aesthetic of attractions through a narrative of a return to the primitive and the reassertion of rationality. In the 1930s and 1940s, Adorno (1991; Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997) would also use Freud's model to explain the presence of irrationality in post-Enlightenment society, constructing a philosophical critique of mass culture that was prefigured in precisely the mass mediated films, such as Moulin Rouge and The Phantom, that he denounced.

#### **4.7: Adorno's Critique of Mass Culture and Beyond**

Adorno was a pupil and friend of Kracauer, both members of the Frankfurt School, and also drew explicitly on Freud's psychology in his critique of mass

culture, which spanned many works from the 1930s onwards. Like Kracauer, Adorno was interested in the interrelations between economic/political systems and the aesthetics of mass culture, modelled on Karl Marx's conception of the dynamic relationship between economic base, political superstructure and ideology (Marx, 1977). Unlike Kracauer, Adorno did not address the cancan directly, but the similarities and differences between his conception of mass culture and that presented in Moulin Rouge and The Phantom, highlight both the continuity of these films with previous constructions of rationality and irrationality, and the ways in which they pointed towards a new configuration of these concepts, which Benjamin would articulate.

In 'On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening' (1991), originally published in 1938 as a critical response to Benjamin's 1936 essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1973b) (discussed in the next section), Adorno attacks music and, briefly, dance, in mass culture, and thereby outlines the premises of his cultural criticism. Like Kracauer, but to a greater degree, Adorno sees in popular music and dance a regression to the irrational. Implicitly drawing on Freud, he characterises this regression as a return to an "infantile stage" whose "primitivism is not that of the undeveloped, but that of the forcibly retarded" (Adorno, 1991, 46-47). In the case of dance, for which he uses the example of the jitterbug, this primitivism is evident in the dance's "compulsive character" (1991, 53), and its imitation of sensual/sexual gestures – pathological and grotesque qualities that had defined irrational performance since the nineteenth century. Echoing nineteenth-century critiques of the cancan, as well as Levinson's analysis of the chorus line, he describes the

jitterbug as, “stylized like the ecstasies savages go into in beating the war-drums. It has convulsive aspects reminiscent of St. Vitus’s dance or the reflexes of mutilated animals” (1991, 53)<sup>15</sup>. Adorno also employs Kracauer’s critique of the mass ornament as a distraction from rational revolution, by attributing to popular music a “diversionary function” (1991, 33).

Adorno, like Kracauer, argues that mass culture reflects not just the primitive past, but also contemporary economics. Both writers see mass culture as the infiltration of capitalist mass production into the aesthetic realm, a notion for which Adorno uses the term ‘culture industry’. However, unlike Kracauer, Adorno does not consider the mechanical quality of mass cultural forms to be either rational or liberatory. For example, Adorno and Kracauer agree that, “[t]he sacrifice of individuality... follows from the basic fact that in broad areas the same thing is offered to everybody by the standardized production of consumption goods” (Adorno, 1991, 40). However, the “liquidation of the individual” (1991, 35) that Kracauer interpreted as an embodiment of rationality and liberation from mythology in the mass ornament, becomes for Adorno the sign of mass culture’s enslavement of the individual<sup>16</sup>. Furthermore, while Kracauer welcomed the dissection of time and space through reason in the mass ornament, Adorno argues in the ‘The Schema of Mass Culture’ (1991) that the mass production and repetition of acts that characterise the variety format, as well as jazz and film, constitute a “betrayal of the temporal order.... in which history comes to a standstill” (1991, 70). Whereas Kracauer views rationalisation as a solution to the problem of irrationality in mass culture, for Adorno,

paradoxically, it is precisely the rationalising influence of mechanical production that makes mass culture irrationally compulsive and enslaving.

Although Kracauer's essay on the mass ornament was published in 1927, in between the release of The Phantom in 1925 and Moulin Rouge in 1928, whereas Adorno's work on the culture industry appeared much later, the narratives of these films promote a critique of mass culture that is closer to Adorno's pessimism than Kracauer's ambivalence. For example, the rhythmic kicks of disembodied cancan legs, set to jazz music, in the montage at the end of Moulin Rouge, embody Paryisa's enslavement to the entertainment machine of the cabaret. This enslavement becomes a primitive regression later in the scene, when the cancan dancers are replaced by the blackface chorus, who close in on Parysia, and then carry her offstage, unconscious. As Parysia begins her routine again, followed by the repetitive mechanical revolutions of the Moulin Rouge windmill sails, and then the close of the film, it becomes clear that the insistent rationality of the cancan signifies here not the possibility of liberation that Kracauer saw in the mass ornament, but the impossibility of escape that Adorno attributed to mass culture as a whole.

The similarities between the narrative of The Phantom and Adorno's theory can be seen most clearly in relation to the latter's 1951 essay, 'Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda' (1991). Here Adorno argues that Freud addresses the central problem of fascism when he asks, "which psychological forces result in the transformation of individuals into a mass[?]" (Adorno, 1991, 135), and that his answer to this question - the rational exploitation of the

libidinal desire of the masses by their leaders - explains how fascism works. Furthermore, just as Freud compares the libidinal bond between members of a group to that between the hypnotised subject and the hypnotist, Adorno equates the techniques of the hypnotist and the fascist leader. He argues that the demagogue, like the hypnotist, uses rationally calculated methods to induce ordinarily rational subjects to regress to primitive psychology, and, by extension, to induce a population of rational individuals to become a primal horde, in thrall to its leader. In The Phantom, the hypnotic powers of the psychologist, Dr. Renault, are given a similarly menacing connotation, particularly through their juxtaposition with images of the cancan. In the cancan montage at the end of the first Moulin Rouge scene, the rapid intercutting of images of the wild, but increasingly steamer-bound cancan dancers, with images of Julien, the mechanical turning of the Moulin Rouge windmill sails, and close-ups of Dr Renault's eyes, suggest that the attraction of liberation from rationality, experienced both by Julien and by the cancan dancers and spectators, is in fact a smoke-screen, behind which lies enslavement.

Moulin Rouge and The Phantom pre-empted Adorno's argument that mass culture, despite its rationalised/mechanised appearance, can produce irrational behaviour. These films drew on the nineteenth-century fear of the irrational masses, and the popular entertainments that attracted them, articulated in the crowd theory of Le Bon, and later, Freud. Where these films diverge from Adorno, however, is in their employment of the very techniques that their narratives demonise, a contradiction that the British critics of Moulin Rouge emphasised. The use of the aesthetic of attractions by these films and many

others, provoked Adorno to include cinema among the perpetrators of mass cultural enslavement in his 1966 essay 'Transparencies on Film': "The movements which the film presents are mimetic impulses which prior to all content and meaning, incite the viewers and listeners to fall into step as if in a parade" (Adorno, 1991, 183). The metaphor here is telling, referring both to military parades, evoking the fascist spectacle of the Nuremberg rallies, and to the mass ornaments described by Kracauer, including the rationalised cancan of the Tiller Girls. For Adorno, these two physical practices participate in the same process of fascist mass manipulation.

Adorno's outright rejection of mass culture is based on his and Max Horkheimer's revision of Enlightenment historiography. In Dialectic of Enlightenment (1997), originally published in 1947, Adorno and Horkheimer refute the idea, rooted in eighteenth-century philosophy and propounded by Kracauer, that Enlightenment brings reason, which in turn brings freedom from the irrational. Instead they argue that Enlightenment contains both social freedom and the retreat into irrational mythology, a form of enslavement which finds its apogee in fascism. This argument draws on the eighteenth-century philosopher Immanuel Kant's (1724-1804) 1784 tenet that, "Enlightenment is mankind's exit from its self-incurred immaturity" (Kant, 1996, 58), but whereas Kant posited that reason was the tool of this emergence, Adorno and Horkheimer contend that reason has often led back into immaturity. The premise here is the ideal of an evolutionary timeline from irrationality and enslavement to rationality and freedom. Adorno and Horkheimer object that in post-Enlightenment history, irrationality seems to have appeared out of sequence, arising out of reason where

it should have been eradicated by it, and they explain this, without contradicting their posited timeline, by using the Freudian notion of regression. Furthermore, while they do not attribute negative connotations to primitive irrationality (in fact Adorno argued in 1967 that “lower” art fostered a “rebellious resistance” before “civilisational constraints” were imposed upon it [Adorno, 1991, 98-99]), its appearance out of the ‘natural order’ is always associated with enslavement.

Although the narratives of Moulin Rouge and The Phantom presuppose the same evolutionary timeline as Adorno, demanding that their protagonists must reject the aberration of irrationality and return to rational maturity in order for the plot to resolve, their reliance on the aesthetic of attractions undermines this temporal order. This disruption occurs on three levels: the attractions disrupt the flow of the narrative within the film, as the British critics pointed out in the case of Moulin Rouge; the re-emergence of the attraction into narrative film, which started with Chaplin, disrupts the historical dominance of narrative since 1907; and the irrationality of the attraction disrupts the evolutionary trajectory towards rationality proposed in the Enlightenment, and whose failure is lamented by Adorno. The ill-defined and unstable alternation between narrative and attraction within the films at the first level, draws attention to the disruption to the historical and historiographical narratives on the second and third levels respectively. Thus, in these films, the Enlightenment rupture between rationality and irrationality, held in tension through the discourse of evolutionism in the nineteenth century, and so seamlessly woven together by Fuller in the *fin de siècle*, becomes starkly visible.

Benjamin, another German Jewish intellectual and a Frankfurt School associate of Adorno, addressed the problem of the disintegration of the Enlightenment model, not specifically through constructions of the body (although his theories have implications for the body), but through constructions of time. In response to the re-emergence of irrationality, Benjamin did not invoke the notion of regression within the evolutionary timescale, but dispensed with the evolutionary idea of history altogether. In his essay ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, Benjamin redefines the Marxist notion of historical materialism as a historiographical methodology in which the historian avoids “telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one” (1973a, 255). History emerges not as a linear progression, but as a constantly shifting network of references forward and backward in time<sup>17</sup>. Therefore, the re-appearance of an image from the past, such as irrationality for example, is not a regression, but a reworking of the past for the present.

For Benjamin (1973b), films which employ the aesthetic of attractions, such as Moulin Rouge and The Phantom (he uses the example of Chaplin films), and those who enjoy them, do so not because they are trapped within a primitive psychological state, but because it enables a liberation from the sort of historical and cultural timeline that Adorno, and their own narratives, propose, into past modes of presentation and reception that connect with the present moment, but may also be experienced as ‘other’. Moulin Rouge and The Phantom employed the liberatory attraction, but framed it within the regressive historical narrative of Freud and Adorno, rather than Benjamin’s radical historiography. However,



Benjaminian history offered the possibility that cinema could relate to the attraction, and to its history in the cinema of attractions, in a different way. By the time Benjamin wrote about the revolutionary potential of film in 1936, and historical materialism in 1940, this possibility was already being explored not only by avant-garde filmmakers, but in the genre of the film musical.

#### **4.8: Adorno's lament and the Brief Flowering of Irrational Liberation: Exiled Intellectuals and Film Musicals**

The conflict between narrative and attraction in films such as Moulin Rouge and The Phantom found a new site of negotiation in the film musicals that emerged particularly from Hollywood after the introduction of sound in 1927<sup>18</sup>. Martin Rubin (1993) argues that the film musical genre is based on a tension between an impulse to integrate the attraction or spectacle into the narrative, and an opposing impulse to resist this integration and retain the autonomy of the spectacle. Rubin outlines two dominant models towards which individual film musicals of the early sound period gravitated in articulating this tension: the model exemplified by Busby Berkeley (1895-1976) at the Warner Bros. studio, in which the spectacle, based on the mass regimented movement of female chorus line dancers, was conceived and presented almost entirely separately from the narrative; and the model typified by the Fred Astaire/Ginger Rogers partnership at the RKO studio (1933-1938), in which the spectacle of the individual movement styles of the main protagonists was integrated into the narrative. In this section it will be argued that the opposition between these two models

parallels the disagreement over the value of mass culture that emerged in the 1930s between Adorno and Benjamin.

In Adorno's 1938 critique of mass-produced music, he argues that when music is mediated, "the entertainment, the pleasure, the enjoyment it promises, is given only to be simultaneously denied.... Enjoyment still retains a place only in the immediate bodily presence" (Adorno, 1991, 30 and 33) (although he later shifted his position on the body, while maintaining his critique of mass culture; see section 1.4). This essay was a critical response to Benjamin's 1936 essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1973b), in which he analyses the nostalgic sentiment that Adorno was later to express. Benjamin argues that the replacement of the original work of art, which has a unique existence in space and time, with multiple mechanical copies of the artwork, is felt as a loss of aura, or authenticity. Adorno laments this loss of aura, idealising the unmediated presence of live performance. Benjamin argues that the "most powerful agent" (1973b, 215) of the depletion of aura is film, and indeed Adorno's lament was echoed in film criticism in the 1930s, particularly regarding filmed dance. In the same year that Benjamin published his 'Work of Art' essay, Lincoln Kirstein (1907-1996), the American promoter of the arts, wrote,

There is a curious change effected in the carry-over of human movement from the stage to the screen.... In this transposition something vital is often lost. It is lost even in acting but in dancing, which is so much more the electric essence of physicality, the loss seems proportionately greater.

Kirstein, 1936, 11

Kirstein expresses nostalgia for the immediate, physical, 'electric' relationship between performer and spectator that defined irrational performance in the nineteenth century, and whose danger was ameliorated through the mediation of narrative film. However, in retrospect, the performer's irrational body is romanticised as a natural, rational, auratic body, as against the unnatural, mediated body presented on film. This romanticism is evident in his endorsement of Astaire as,

the best that dancing has to say for itself in our films.... [With] his natural elegance and musical instinct, he seems to use more than one part of his body and he makes his camera follow him, seemingly for miles, so that a very dramatic tension is built up over a large terrain.

Kirstein, 1936, 11

For Kirstein, Astaire's use of full-body shots and minimal editing allowed his 'natural', rationally co-ordinated body to be displayed with minimal mediation, although Astaire's 'natural' elegance was in fact constructed by rationalising the African-American movements on which his style drew, by emphasising verticality and lightness, rather than angularity and gravity, for example. Kirstein compares this with, "the Babylonian vision sponsored by Busby Berkeley" in which, "the result is, more often than not, too big for the camera lens, too much to see, and only awe inspiring for its multiplicity of effects" (1936, 12). This excess, and the deliberate use of mediating effects, contrasted sharply with Astaire's approach, in which the aim was to create an impression of the live individual performer (or couple), rather than the mediated mass. Kirstein linked Astaire with the beginnings of a trend in Hollywood "to make use of dancing as an inherent part of dramatic action, instead of as interpolated "relief" as in most of the Eddie Cantor works" (1936, 11), which were choreographed by Berkeley

between 1930 and 1933. Astaire's rationalised body was integrated into the narrative, whereas Berkeley's spectacles punctured rational causality.

Jane Feuer's (1993) analysis of The Hollywood Musical focuses primarily on the Astaire model. She argues that film musicals attempted to overcome the alienation of spectator from performer inherent in their own mass production, by creating the illusion of direct performer/spectator interaction associated with live entertainment. For example, dance was constructed as unchoreographed, unrehearsed and spontaneous, effacing the labour required for its production. Ultimately, however, this irrationality/freedom/spontaneity/spectacle was synthesised with rationality/reality/narrative in the backstage musical through the simultaneous marriage of the couple and the success of the show. Feuer draws on the Marxist critique of the alienation inherent in the capitalist production process, filtered through Adorno's critique of mass culture. Her examples correspond with these approaches because the films she cites, such as those starring Astaire, perform the same critique of mass-mediated culture that Adorno would later articulate. However, Feuer rarely refers to Berkeley or films made in the 'Berkeleyesque' style (see Rubin, 1993), perhaps because they embody a different relation to mass mediation, one that Benjamin would illuminate.

Benjamin and Adorno's different conceptions of post-Enlightenment history led to a disagreement over the issue of the value of mass culture. Whereas Adorno attributed freedom only to the performers and spectators of live, non-mass produced entertainment, viewing the loss of aura and the imposition of mediation as necessarily enslaving, Benjamin (1973b) saw the possibility of liberation in

mass-mediated artworks. He argues that the depletion of aura in the mechanically reproduced work of art, liberates it from association with its original ritual use and opens it to new functions. In film, the mass medium *par excellence*, these functions are not purely distracting and therefore enslaving, as Adorno would argue, but constitute a ‘shock effect’ that induces both distraction and a critical mode of reception. The shock of film is caused by the “contant, sudden change” of images, “which, like all shocks, should be cushioned by heightened presence of mind” (Benjamin, 1973b, 231-32), characteristic of the critical mode of reception. But the shock of film also causes distraction, in that the “changes of place and focus which periodically assail the spectator” (1973b, 231) carry her/him along, replacing independent thought. Benjamin describes this distracted mode of reception as “tactile”, in the sense of the tactile mode of exploration one might unconsciously revert to when exploring a new building. He points out that,

the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at the turning points of history cannot be solved by optical means, that is, by contemplation, alone. They are mastered gradually by habit, under the guidance of tactile appropriation.

Benjamin, 1973b, 233

A subconscious, tactile approach, Benjamin implies, is better suited to exploring the geography of a new building, or a new historical situation, than conscious contemplation. In fact, only by submitting to the physical state of reception demanded by film, he argues, can we discover new worlds within our rational reality, and therefore become liberated from it:

Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go travelling.

Benjamin, 1973b, 229

This constitutes a defence of the physical mode of reception that defines irrational spectatorship, and of the mass cultural forms that harness it. For Benjamin, unlike Adorno, the re-emergence of a tactile, irrational spectatorship is not an enslaving regression in the linear evolutionary pathway to rationality, but an example of the liberatory reworking of an aspect of the past for the present. This approach to history and irrationality was already evident in the work of avant-garde and Berkeleyesque filmmakers.

The French avant garde of the 1920s not only appropriated and redeployed the irrational attraction in their films, but they developed a form of spectatorship in which the modes of presentation and reception of past films could be appreciated in the present. Writing in 1947, Clair described the opening of the avant-garde cinema *Studio des Ursulines* in Paris in 1925:

On the screen of the small theatre... there appeared one evening films that had grown pale and were marked with those streaks that are the wrinkles of celluloid – a program of “prewar films”.

Clair, 1972, 236

Clair identified this as the moment “when the cinema turned back toward its past for the first time” (Clair, 1972, 237). The cinema of attractions, previously an object of repression and denial for rational, narrative cinema, became a potential source of enjoyment, inspiration, and even liberation. For the avant-garde artists

who assembled at the cinema's opening, including Clair, André Breton, Man Ray, Fernand Léger and Robert Desnos, this new cinematic practice, like their reinvention of the attraction, was not a return to the past, but a reorientation of the past towards a revolutionary future.

Berkeley's choreography for mainstream film similarly employed the aesthetic of attractions for liberatory purposes. Berkeley drew on the regimented feminine aesthetic of the chorus line and the revue format which had developed in France alongside the cancan in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries<sup>19</sup>. Having supervised parade drills in the First World War (Rubin, 1993, 201), Berkeley was skilled in the art of disciplining bodies into geometric formations, and applied this knowledge on Broadway in the 1920s, learning from other producers of live mass female spectacles, such as Florenz Ziegfeld (1867-1932). Film offered Berkeley not the means of reproducing the live theatrical experience, as for Astaire, but of exceeding its limitations. He sought not to reduce the effects of mass mediation on the dancing body, but to increase them, and therefore increase the spectator's attraction to the spectacle. The irrational undercurrent of the mass ornament was seen not as enslaving, as Kracauer and Adorno would have it, but liberating, pre-empting Benjamin. The logic of the mechanical other, embodied in the nineteenth-century cancan and the cinema of attractions, whose mechanisation multiplies its irrationality and its allure, liberating the spectator from rationality, re-emerges in Berkeley's choreography. Indeed, Berkeley's spectacles were conceived as a release from the rational narrative, momentarily bucking its causal flow.

In Berkeley's choreography, as in irrational performance of the nineteenth century and the cinema of attractions, the relationship between performer and spectator is predominantly conceived as a heterosexual one, defined by the attraction and threat of the gendered other<sup>20</sup>. This defied narrative convention, adhered to in Astaire's films and the non-spectacle sections of Berkeley's, in which the romantic relationship was displaced from the performer/spectator onto the screen. Although the female bodies that Berkeley put on display were mass produced, rationalised and regimented, as in the chorus line, this only magnified their capacity to disrupt rationality through their attraction, their escape from linear narrative and the realistic spaces it inhabited, such as the theatre, and their grotesque construction by the camera, such as the 'crotch shot', in which the camera moves through the dancers' open legs. Berkeley did not draw on cancan movements (he is renowned for drawing on very little dance movement whatsoever), but the camera itself granted and denied access to parts of the body that the cancan dancer herself had previously revealed and concealed, such as the legs, mirroring Clair's ballerina filmed through a glass floor in *Entr'acte* (1924)<sup>21</sup>. Berkeley held Broadway's mass production of female bodies up to a camera lens, multiplying its irrationality, while harnessing it to the commercial machine of Hollywood. In the 1920s, the re-emergence of irrationality from beneath the surface of the rational had been conceived as a threat to rational order in films such as Moulin Rouge and The Phantom, but in the 1930s, during the rise of fascism in Europe and the Depression in the United States, the idea that bodies controlled by commercial or political ideologies still had the potential for irrationality and freedom, was a source of comfort for many. The escapist value of Berkeleyesque films to contemporary spectators indicates that the



mediated, mechanised bodies of mass culture could carry liberatory connotations in this context.

In the late 1930s, while Adorno was arguing that mass culture exclusively produced enslaved bodies, several European intellectuals living in or in exile from totalitarian states developed theories that posited the body's capacity to resist enslavement by the norms of official or state culture. Outram observes that, "[m]odern histories of the body originated during the same era as the high point of European fascism" (1989, 7), including the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and Norbert Elias. Bakhtin's thesis (1984) that since the Renaissance a liberatory, grotesque construction of the body has sporadically been invoked as a challenge to the official, classical one (see section 1.4; and section 2.3), was written in Russia in the late 1930s at the height of Stalin's reign, and therefore responded not directly to fascism, but to the totalitarian aspects of Soviet communism. The critique it implied of the communist regime was evident in the controversy the thesis caused amongst Soviet scholars and Bakhtin's denial of a doctorate (Holquist, 1984). Elias was a German Jew, whose 1939 work on the relationship between the state and the body, The Civilising Process (1994), stopped short of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Outram suggests, as a matter of political expediency for a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany working in Britain. However, in his 1968 postscript, Elias contrasts the 'closed personality' of *homo clausus* with the possibility of an

"open personality" who possesses a greater or lesser degree of relative (but never absolute and total) autonomy vis-à-vis other people and who is, in fact, fundamentally orientated towards and dependent on other people throughout his or her life.... Such

interdependences are the nexus of what is here called the *figuration*,  
a structure of mutually orientated and dependent people.  
Elias, 1994, 481-82, original emphasis

Elias exemplifies this idea with reference to social dances such as the mazurka,  
minuet, polonaise, tango and rock 'n' roll:

The image of the mobile figurations of interdependent people on a  
dance floor perhaps makes it easier to imagine states, cities, families  
and also capitalist, communist and feudal systems as figurations.  
Elias, 1994, 482

While this metaphor obviously glosses the many differences between these  
dances, Elias points toward the fact that in modern European culture, dance has  
often made manifest the possibility of alternative constructions of the body, and  
of the body politic.

However, as Europe and then the United States entered the Second World War,  
these expressions of faith in the irrational became subject to increasing suspicion.  
Adorno would argue in 1951 that fascist regimes used rationally calculated  
techniques to prey on irrationality by turning its energies to extreme nationalist  
ends (Adorno, 1991, 137 and 150). Indeed, Benito Mussolini (1883-1945;  
President of the Council of Ministers of Italy from 1922-1943) was an admirer of  
Le Bon's theory that crowds are psychologically open to the influence of strong  
leaders (Clark, 1984, 135), and the attempt to manipulate irrationality to create a  
rational, pure body politic was the basis of the fascist technology of power. It  
was tempting to accept the theory, later articulated by Adorno, that all  
irrationality was a symptom of the regression of society to enslavement. As

Andreas Huyssen points out, though, Adorno's theories "cannot be totally divorced from the pressures of that era" (Huyssen, 1986, 197).

Benjamin had refuted this view in 1936, although his assumed suicide in 1940 prevented him from witnessing some of the Nazi atrocities that later made Adorno's position so enticing. In an epilogue to his 'Work of Art' essay, written while in exile from Nazi persecution in Paris, Benjamin (1973b, 324-35) defended mass culture against charges of fascism, arguing that fascism is rather a perversion of mass culture. Drawing heavily on Marx, Benjamin contends that whereas the masses strive to revolutionise the hierarchy created by property relations, fascism engages the masses while preserving this hierarchy. In other words, fascism manipulates the irrational aesthetic of mass culture, for example through the mass hysteria of the Nuremberg rallies, but uses this to create a rational, exclusive, closed body politic, in which irrational elements deemed pathological to this national body, are subject to mass-mechanised extermination in the form of the systematic destruction of degenerate art, eugenics programmes and mass genocide. Furthermore, he argues that whereas mass reproduction results in the liberation of art from its association with ritual and its veneration as auratic, releasing it into the realm of exchange, the Führer cult of fascism is tantamount to forcing mass art back into its ritual function. Mass art, he implies, employs the irrational aesthetic in a liberatory fashion, whereas fascism forces it into the regressive, enslaving uses that Adorno feared. Benjamin's observation that "Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life" (1973b, 234) points towards the notion that fascism arose out of the regimentation of the irrational body in mass culture, but turned this aesthetic to extreme political ends.

Benjamin's argument is supported by more recent research. As Ramsay Burt (1998) points out using Foucault's terminology, the docile bodies of the 1920s and 1930s could be hijacked for a range of ideals, and these appropriations did not always effectively erase previous meanings. For example, mass displays of disciplined bodies were employed by left-wing workers-sports associations before they were appropriated by the right-wing National Socialists, who, according to Henning Eichberg, found them difficult to control and ineffective (Eichberg cited in Burt, 1998, 106-07). Furthermore, as Susan Manning (1993) argues, the accommodation of the German expressionist dancer and choreographer Mary Wigman to fascist aesthetics in the mid-1930s, did not erase the feminist and modernist concerns that had influenced her earlier work, and that provided the potential for limited resistance to National Socialist aesthetics. Adorno's proposition that any attempt to manipulate the body is necessarily an enslavement, attempts to deal with the range of complex relations between politics, economics and the body in the 1930s by forcing them into a linear Enlightenment scale from the rational, 'natural', individual body to the irrational, mass, enslaved one, in which difference becomes regression.

However, Adorno's model was appealing in a situation where fascism appeared to be a pathological growth in the otherwise rational body of Europe. This fostered a simplified, linear historiography of the period, in which, "fascism is seen as an irrational aberration that was opposed to modernity and progress which, as 'we' all know, is based upon rational, scientific principles" (Burt, 1998, 112). In scholarship, this led to an almost complete disregard for the work

of Benjamin, Bakhtin and Elias until postmodern theorists began to rediscover their writings in the late twentieth century. In film musicals, this resulted in what Larry Billman (1997) describes as a backlash against the Berkeleysque from the mid-1930s onwards. The re-emergence of the irrational that Benjamin, Bakhtin, Elias and Berkeley had advocated, was reigned in and replaced with a return to the Enlightenment march of rationality.

#### **4.9: Conclusion**

Framed by the human tragedy of the world wars, this period in the cancan's history was defined by a haunting doubt that the Enlightenment vision of the ordered society that rationality would bring, could be realised. For some, such as Levinson and Benjamin, this rupture in the linear progression of history offered the chance of liberation. For others, such as Kracauer and Adorno, any digression from the path of reason meant a regression into enslavement. Freud articulated the hopes and fears of the time in his model of the primitive unconscious seducing the rational mind from within.

In the 1920s, the live cancan embodied the rational façade of modern mass culture, behind which lurked the spectre of irrational disorder, returning from France's 'primitive' nineteenth century past. On screen, the cancan appeared in montages which disrupted the rational progression of the protagonist, the plot and cinema history with the temptation of repressed desires. However, in the 1930s, with the rise of fascism in Europe and the Depression in the United States, the return of the irrational took on new connotations. In Berkeleysque

film musicals and in the writings of certain scholars working in, or in exile from, totalitarian regimes, the performance of an aesthetic of attractions, through the body or on film, constituted a form of resistance or release from hegemonic ideologies. But as Europe, and then the United States entered the Second World War, these liberating possibilities for the irrational became stifled amidst a growing fear of ideological indoctrination that would reach its peak in the Cold War.

## **Chapter 5: Americans in Paris: The Cold War Redeployment of the Cancan in 1950s film musicals**

### **5.1: Introduction**

In Hollywood musicals of the 1930s and 1940s, the issues of attraction and narrative raised by The Phantom of the Moulin Rouge (1925) and Moulin Rouge (1928) were mediated without necessarily referring to the cancan itself.

However, the cancan re-emerged as a popular subject in musicals of the 1950s made on both sides of the Atlantic. These include An American in Paris (1951), Moulin Rouge (1952), French Cancan (1955) and Can-Can (1960). This chapter is structured around analyses of each of these films in chronological order. It is argued that the reanimation of nineteenth-century representations of the cancan in these films allowed their filmmakers to position themselves in relation to the new identities forged by Cold War politics. In particular, the debate over the value and aesthetics of mass culture, performed in the cancan films of the 1920s, and later articulated by Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, is reconfigured by the cancan films of the 1950s to negotiate post-war relations between the United States and France. The ten-year period spanned by the four films discussed here sees not only a gradual shift in the balance of cultural power from Paris to New York, but also a gradual shift in aesthetics that prefigures the postmodernisms of the late twentieth century. The way in which the cancan is employed in each of these films charts this shift.

## 5.2: From the Dancing Sailor to the Cancan: the “Battle for Men’s Minds”

During the 1930s the Moulin Rouge had become a cinema, but the cancan itself was absent from the screen. From 1940 to 1944 short revues were staged in the dance hall for an audience mostly consisting of German soldiers, and after the war the dance hall was closed, and the cinema was placed under the control of the state (Pessis and Crepineau, 1990). Beth Genné observes that when Paris was liberated in 1944, the ensuing sense of freedom found corporeal form not in the French bodies of cancan dancers, but in the relaxed, carefree movement of young American soldiers, whose stumbling gait so contrasted with the stiffness of the occupiers, that the author and philosopher Simone de Beauvoir described them as “freedom incarnate” (de Beauvoir cited in Genné, 2001, 83). Genné argues that during the war and in the direct aftermath, this image of the dancing soldier liberating Europe from fascist enslavement embodied American values on the Broadway stage and the Hollywood screen, in, for example, Jerome Robbins’ ballet Fancy Free (1944) and the films Anchors Aweigh (1945) and On the Town (1949) starring Gene Kelly. However, she notes that as international alignments shifted in the wake of the war, and World War politics transformed into Cold War politics, the dancing sailor lost his potency as an emblem of freedom. In this section it will be argued that these circumstances facilitated the return of the cinematic cancan as a site on which Cold War struggles between the two countries would be fought.

Eric Foner dates the official American declaration of Cold War to March 1947 when President Harry Truman called on “freedom-loving” peoples to rise up



against communism (Foner, 1998, 1). On 9th February 1950, Senator Joseph McCarthy gave his famous anti-communist speech (Guilbaut, 1990, 5), instigating a campaign to rid the American body politic of communism and “foreign ideologies” (Clark cited in Foner, 1998, 1). Communism was feared not just for its politics, but for, “its apparent success in capturing the bodies, minds, and souls of other countries” (Foner, 1998, 7), that is, its ability to appeal to the irrational faculties. The United States constructed itself during this period as free from such ideological constraints.

However, the United States was not immune from the shift in Western technologies of power that had produced communism. Gustav Le Bon (1896) had noted in the late nineteenth century that the irrationality of the crowd could be harnessed for political purposes, and in 1927 the American political sociologist Harold Lasswell advocated that democratic governments engage with these techniques:

We are witnessing the growth of a world public, and this public has arisen in part because propaganda has at once agitated and organised it.... There is no doubt that democratic governments must assume the task, regardless of all complicating difficulties, of mobilizing minds as well as men and money in war.

Lasswell cited in Osgood, 2006, 15

The masses that the cancan and the cinema of attractions had “agitated” and that commerce and nationalist politics had “organised”, could now be conceived as a powerful global force. As Lasswell predicted, on 20th April 1950 President Truman launched a worldwide “Campaign of Truth”, a psychological offensive to counter communist propaganda and promote American values, described by

Truman as a “battle for men’s minds” (Truman, 1950). This war was to be fought not with the rationalised bodies of the military, but with the irrational bodies of the international masses, whose supposed openness to ideological indoctrination made them pawns in a game of superpower diplomacy.

France was a major battleground in this war. The creation of a European front against the spread of communism was a strong factor in American economic support for European post-war reconstruction. As Serge Guilbaut (1990) notes, England and West Germany were firmly on the American side of the ideological divide, but the communist parties in France and Italy were well-supported due to their contribution to the anti-fascist resistance during the war (Guilbaut, 1983). Thus, France was a target of American anti-communist propaganda, and the prevention of a communist French government was a condition of American reconstruction aid (Guilbaut, 1990). One result of this Franco-American ideological disagreement was that the United States could not risk the cultural hegemony that France had enjoyed since the nineteenth century being put to communist purposes. Therefore, Guilbaut (1990) argues, it became clear from an American point of view that the containment of communism was dependant upon its wresting of cultural supremacy from France. France, however, assumed its cultural ascendancy would continue, leading to a cultural battle that would have wide-reaching political and aesthetic consequences.

The military conflict of the Second World War thus gave way to the cultural diplomacy of the Cold War. President Dwight D. Eisenhower wrote in July 1954 that, “I consider it essential that we take immediate and vigorous action to

demonstrate the superiority of the products and cultural values of our system of free enterprise” (Eisenhower cited in Prevots, 1998, 11). As Guilbaut’s (1983; 1990) research on modern art during the Cold War shows, this cultural battle was already in progress on an unofficial level in the late 1940s. He argues that American post-war political rhetoric effectively collapsed together fascism and communism as totalitarian regimes defined by enforced conformity and denial of personal freedom, and contrasted them with American liberalism and individualism. In the post-war years the United States sought to prove its commitment to these ideals by claiming the new Abstract Expressionist art movement as an embodiment of its national values, and then of universal values. However, while this movement laboured to demonstrate its ‘American-ness’ by rejecting Parisian art, the idea of the modern artist who expresses his individualism and freedom through controversial art, was in fact an invention of nineteenth-century Paris. Thus, Guilbaut concludes, the United States ‘stole’ the idea of modern art from Paris to use as a weapon in the battle for cultural supremacy that defined the early Cold War.

This chapter proposes that a similar argument can be made regarding representations of the cancan in American film during the same period<sup>1</sup>. Guilbaut argues that during the early Cold War the United States was caught between, “the annihilation of the individual in the totalitarian regimes and... the absorption of the individual into the mass of consumers in the capitalist regimes” (Guilbaut, 1983, 198). In physical terms, this choice could be rendered as between the over-rationalised body of totalitarianism, conceived as a cog in an oppressive social machine, and the over-irrational body of consumer society, whose individuality

was perceived to be lost amidst mass reactions to mass-produced attractions. Guilbaut contends that the individual modern painter or artist, modelled on the French Impressionists and Post-Impressionists, represented a middle ground between these political extremes. By referring back to the liberatory individualism of late nineteenth-century painters, American modern artists avoided both “Soviet regimentation” and “the artistic traditions of the 1930s, which had been one [sic] of group solidarity and unions” (Guilbaut, 1990, 37). This argument can be extended by noting that the *fin-de-siècle* artist’s liberatory individualism was based on his use of painting to mediate and therefore harness the irrationalities perceived in the world and bodies around him, associating himself with both the liberation of the irrational, and the rational ability to control, contain and represent it. This is exemplified in the work of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, who painted the embodiment of irrationality in the cancan. While American artists of the late 1940s and 1950s strove to equal and then surpass the great Parisian painters, American film directors of the 1950s sought to emulate and then usurp the power of late nineteenth-century French artists to mediate the irrational, particularly that represented by the *fin-de-siècle* cancan. By filming the cancan, and aligning themselves with the painters who first captured its unruly forms, these filmmakers negotiated a path between rationality and irrationality, identifying themselves with the liberatory individualism of American Cold War politics.

This act of appropriation was implicitly gendered. The French Impressionist and Post-Impressionist artists had reproduced the power relationship between male artist and female muse associated with the romantic bohemian painters of the

early nineteenth century. In imitating the strategies of cultural dominance employed by the late nineteenth-century painters, American filmmakers also adopted this romantic gender hierarchy. The liberal individualism that they cultivated was therefore coded not only as American, but as masculine, against the femininity of their irrational subject matter.

The cinematisation of the 1890s cancan often ostensibly took the form of a homage to the French past as an embodiment of the liberalism to which 1950s American society aspired. President Truman reaffirmed the specifically liberal character of American identity, as against Soviet politics, in his inaugural address,

The American people stand firm in the faith which has inspired this Nation from the beginning. We believe that all men have a right to equal justice under law and equal opportunity to share in the common good. We believe that all men have a right to freedom of thought and expression....The American people desire, and are determined to work for, a world in which all nations and all peoples are free to govern themselves as they see fit, and to achieve a decent and satisfying life.... In the pursuit of these aims, the United States and other like-minded nations find themselves directly opposed by a regime with contrary aims and a totally different concept of life....That false philosophy is communism.

Truman, 1949 [online]

However, American life in the 1950s often diverged from this liberal ideal.

Robert Holton describes the post-war United States as involved in a process of homogenisation caused by a range of factors including:

Cold War politics and post-Taylorist labor practices, altered family structures and housing patterns, religious beliefs and media

technologies, the demographics of urbanization and developments in psychology.

Holton, 2004, 11

The cultural shift towards conformism was augmented by political pressure against dissent, such as the McCarran Internal Security Act and the Subversive Activities Control Act, both passed in 1950, and the search for Communist sympathisers carried out by the House UnAmerican Activities Committee (1945-1975) (Holton, 2004). Since the 1920s, Paris had been a haven for Americans marginalised in their own country, such as African Americans and homosexuals (Wilson, 1999). Karal Ann Marling (2001) argues that in the 1950s, Paris took on increased significance as the aspirational, liberal other to the conformist United States:

To Americans in the fifties, Paris signified every new thing,  
everything missing from the drab uniformity of the previous decades.  
Love and lust. Style. Art and artfulness. Romance on a grand scale.  
And above all, liberation.

Marling, 2001, xiv

This conception of Paris precipitated a sharp rise in American tourism to Europe (Guilbaut, 1990), fuelled, as Marling points out, by French marketing, and a fashion for French products among American consumers (Marling, 2001). From this perspective, the appropriation of the cancan by American directors can be seen as an attempt to capitalise on the American desire for an escape to a liberal, French fantasy world.

However, the observation of the African-American author James Baldwin, that many American artists travelling to Paris in the 1950s were looking for, “the

legend of Paris, not infrequently at the most vulgar and superficial level” (Baldwin cited in Guilbaut, 1990, 65), suggests a slightly different relationship between the two countries. Paris was also constructed by the United States at this time as a place of past greatness, of memory, and of loss. In Benjamin’s (1973b) terms, Paris was auratic, and, like Adorno’s glorification of “immediate bodily presence” (1991, 33), American tourists sought the live attractions that defined Paris’s *Belle Époque*, but seemed lost to the comparative stultification of Parisian artistic innovation (Guilbaut, 1983), and the ravages of the Second World War.

The redefinition of Paris as a lost past corresponded with the contemporary redefinition of the United States as a place of the present, and the future. The French art critic Julien Alvard wrote of Paris in 1951,

Isn’t she now an old capital with the heavy make-up of a Western world already long past maturity and slowly rotting into a frivolous Byzantinism? What should be said about this so-called superiority in the arts, of this imperialism which is no longer but a shadow of a shadow?... The light is coming from somewhere else now.

Alvard cited in Guilbaut, 1990, 64

The relationship between the “old capital” and the new one was performed through the “vulgar and superficial” appropriation of the Parisian past through mediated images, instigating the creation of a new American aesthetic. The practice of capturing the faded grandeur of Paris in tourist snapshots, or of recreating the cancan of the 1890s on film, was not simply an act of theft, but the construction of an aesthetic based on cultural appropriation. The American cultural historian Carl E. Schorske disparagingly noted the ahistoricism of the parallel post-war American fascination with the work of *fin-de-siècle* Viennese

intellectuals in 1961: “Of course America made its cultural borrowings with little sense of the problems and experiences of that ‘other age’, in which the ideas and art that attracted it were shaped” (Schorske, 1961, xxv). Schorske draws a parallel between this disregard for chronology and depth, and Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt’s dictum that, “[h]istory is what one age finds worthy of note in another” (Burckhardt cited in Schorske, 1961, xxv), an approach to history that Benjamin developed into his redefinition of historical materialism in 1940:

The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognised and is never seen again.... For every image of the past that is not recognised by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.

Benjamin, 1973a, 247

This notion of history as constructed (rather than discovered) via mediating images, was put into practice by the American film industry in the 1950s, for whom the liberalism of the cancan dancer was “one of its own concerns”.

The *fin-de-siècle* cancan dancer embodied American diplomatic concerns at this time, not only in terms of the cancan’s liberal connotations and democratic distribution of control throughout the body’s limbs (see section 2.6), but by virtue of its hypnotic appeal. The ability to mediate and therefore harness the cancan’s infectious liberalism, was a weapon that could be used in the battle for men’s minds. This chapter does not propose any direct link between American foreign policy and the cancan films of the 1950s, either in terms of government intervention in the film industry or the personal politics of the filmmakers. Rather, it is argued here that the filmmakers involved acted on their personal interests to position their work strategically within a complex global cultural



field influenced heavily by the Cold War, without necessarily making a consciously political statement. The Cold War can be read as a conflict over body politics that complicated the rational and irrational terms in which such struggles had been fought since the eighteenth century. In this sense, the Cold War spawned many smaller battles for personal politics, identity, reputation, and commercial success, that drew on the terms of the wider political context in which they took place. The cancan's compulsively liberal body, for example, could be strategically deployed in a range of situations that drew their meaning from the renegotiation of body politics taking place on the global political stage. The following sections explore how the cancan was utilised in four 1950s films, three by American directors (one of whom was working in Britain), and one by a French director.

### **5.3: An American in Paris (1951)**

An American in Paris was an American production directed by Vincente Minnelli and choreographed by Gene Kelly. Though set in late 1940s Paris, it includes a cancan sequence in the 'American in Paris Ballet' set in the Moulin Rouge of the 1890s. The main protagonist is played by Kelly, the quintessential cinematic dancing sailor of the 1940s. In An American in Paris, Kelly leaves behind the dancing sailor image, a shift replicated in his character, Jerry, an ex-GI who was posted to France during the Second World War, and decided to stay and become a painter. Both Kelly and Jerry therefore perform the shift in American post-war foreign policy from military might to cultural diplomacy. The aesthetic form through which the United States would conduct its new foreign

politics is suggested in the opening sequence of the film, in which Paris is presented as a spectacle that can be mastered by capturing it in a visual image. Jerry, speaking over a montage of Parisian sights, invites the spectator to, “Just look at it. No wonder so many artists have come here and called it home”. In the course of the film, the appropriation of Paris by Jerry’s American vision is paralleled by his relationship with the French object of his desire, Lise (Leslie Caron), and, in the ‘American in Paris Ballet’ sequence, by his reanimation of French Impressionist and Post-Impressionist paintings as American ‘cine-dance’.

In the ‘American in Paris Ballet’ at the end of the film, Paris is depicted as if through the eyes of six late nineteenth-century French painters: Raoul Dufy, Auguste Renoir, Maurice Utrillo, Henri Rousseau, Vincent Van Gogh and Toulouse-Lautrec (Levinson, no date). In each scene famous paintings by these artists are ‘brought to life’ by the dancing of Kelly and Caron. The last of these scenes begins with the sketch *Chocolat dansant dans le bar d’Achille* (1896) by Toulouse-Lautrec. The sketch dissolves into a three-dimensional reconstruction of the scene, with Kelly as the African-American Moulin Rouge dancer Chocolat. Kelly then dances through a set composed of scenes and characters from various Toulouse-Lautrec paintings<sup>2</sup>. In the Moulin Rouge, Kelly/Chocolat, dances with Caron, who plays the Moulin Rouge cancan dancer Jane Avril, dressed as she appears in Toulouse-Lautrec’s poster for the *Jardin de Paris* (1893).

Superficially, the sequence appears as an American homage to late-nineteenth-century French art. One might read it as exemplifying Jane Feuer’s (1993) model

of the Hollywood musical dream sequence which reconciles the opposites represented by the romantic couple<sup>3</sup>: French painting and American cine-dance are reconciled via the cinematisation of the work of the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists; European ballet and American tap-dancing are reconciled in Kelly and Caron's jazz ballet; European and American musical styles are combined in George Gershwin's score. From this perspective, Jerry's ultimate choice of the French Lise over her American rival for Jerry's affections, Milo, and Lise's choice of the American Jerry over the French Henri, might be read as a dramatisation of the supposed Franco-American love affair of the 1950s (see Marling, 2001), and a fantasy of the political unification that the United States sought with France in the Cold War.

However, there are undercurrents of a more unequal power relationship between Jerry and Lise, and between the United States and France. The film constructs Jerry and Lise's courtship in terms of the romantic bohemian relationship between artist and muse. Her beauty, exoticism and innocence are mastered by his artistry. Jerry and Lise also embody Americanness and Frenchness. Lise's feminine passivity is contrasted with the assertiveness of Jerry's American, female sponsor, Milo, who is repeatedly referred to as masculine. Similarly, Jerry is contrasted with his French rival for Lise's affections, Henri: Henri is a singer and Jerry dances (as well as being a painter); Henri likes European waltzes by Johann Strauss and Jerry likes American jazz. Lise is engaged to Henri because he looked after her during the occupation while her parents were in the resistance. However, Jerry and Lise's romance suggests a different alignment of national interests: that France could relinquish the allegiances of the war, such as

its debt to Communism for support of the anti-fascist resistance, and unify with the United States, who would treat her as its muse. Paris would become a passive object on which the American artist can dynamically act.

This possibility is performed in the ‘American in Paris Ballet’. Kelly and Caron’s national affinities are made clear in their individual movement styles. Caron’s European ballet movement is contrasted with Kelly’s tap-dancing, identified earlier in the film as “danse American”. Similarly, Kelly’s expansive, jazz-influenced movement and “compact, muscled, laborer’s body” has often been contrasted with Fred Astaire’s style – the former identifying with working-class Americans, while the balletic elegance of the latter locates him in Europe or at least the mid-Atlantic (Genné, 2002, 73). Significantly, in the Toulouse-Lautrec sequence, Kelly becomes not Valentin le Désossé, the French, male cancan dancer who frequently appears in the artist’s paintings, but Chocolat, the black dancer and clown of the Moulin Rouge and the Nouveau Cirque, variously described as Cuban or Spanish, who Toulouse-Lautrec depicted only once in a sketch<sup>4</sup>. Chocolat’s blackness becomes an excuse for Kelly to reconstruct his movement using an African-American-influenced jazz style, thereby reinforcing Kelly’s position on the American side of the Atlantic divide. This interpretation is supported by Kelly’s statement on the sequence that, “I was only adamant about one thing: we must not use the paintings of Degas” (Kelly cited in Vacche, 1996, 35). Although Caron performed ballet in the sequence, Kelly would not embody a style that was still associated with European high art. However, as Vacche (1996, 34) points out, Kelly, like the genres of the film musical and jazz, appropriates black performance for white entertainment. Thus the transatlantic

contrast in Kelly and Caron's dance styles is maintained, as Kelly's jazz is contrasted with Caron's cancan, while Kelly maintains his white identity.

A further distinction is drawn between Kelly's freedom of movement and the choreographed, stiff unison of a regiment of guardsmen which reappear periodically, reminding viewers of the rationalised alternative to Kelly's and Caron's American and French bodies. However, Caron and the guardsmen eventually relinquish their European movement styles and adopt Kelly's jazz, whereas Kelly does not perform their movement. The cancan sequence, for example, concludes with Kelly, Caron and the other cancan dancers processing out of the Moulin Rouge performing an African-American cakewalk, the dance form which replaced the live cancan when the influence of American culture swept Paris at the turn of the twentieth century. Throughout the Ballet it is Kelly's movement through the various sets that the camera predominantly follows, and that determines the narrative, while Caron appears, performs and disappears. When Kelly and Caron's dance styles are reconciled, in the duet jazz ballet sequence, Kelly lifts, turns and displays Caron's body, emphasising his strength and control and her beauty and submissiveness. Their love is based on a gender differential, pointing towards a national differential, between the gazer and the gazed upon, the creative artist and his model.

There is a further layer to this national *pas-de-deux*: the appropriation by American cinema of the cultural mastery associated with French painting, performed through Kelly's dance. Casey Charness (1976) has argued that Kelly's choreography uniquely integrates the art of film with the art of dance, often

producing a cinematic form of dancing that he calls 'cine-dance'. Charness focuses on Kelly's collaborations with the director Stanley Donen, and therefore does not discuss An American in Paris. However, the 'American in Paris Ballet', with its multiple locations joined by editing, and its multiple dissolves, in which dance and film are mutually interdependent, would no doubt be classed by Charness as cine-dance. As Kelly moves through the sequence, the cuts and dissolves that join together the various sets allow him to roam around the two-dimensional painted world that he has entered, blurring the boundaries between paintings and between artists, so that their authorship becomes subsumed to his. As he dances, he brings movement where there was stasis, highlighting the capacity of film to do the same. The contrast between the static paintings and the movement of Kelly's and Caron's dancing is emphasised further by the presence of life-size, two-dimensional reproductions of characters from the paintings within the animated scenes, which are removed from their original context and appear merely as a backdrop to the moving dancers. Here, French Impressionist and Post-Impressionist painting is constructed not as an assertive act of artistic creation, but as the inspiration, the muse, for Kelly's cine-dance, which 'brings them to life'. Cinematisation, Americanisation and reanimation through dance are collapsed together and contrasted with the two-dimensional, static art of French painting (Vacche, 1996, 33-34 makes a similar argument).

Just as Toulouse-Lautrec harnessed the liberal, irrational, revolutionary connotations of the cancan dancer in order to construct himself as a modern artist, Kelly appropriates the work of these artists through the medium of cinematic dance, as a demonstration of his, and American, usurpation of French

cultural mastery and revolutionary liberalism. The specifically cinematic qualities of this appropriation, its dynamic movement, its ahistorical juxtaposition of images, mark it out as a new American aesthetic to contrast with the modern aesthetic that French art had dominated. The cancan functions here as a performance of the reawakening of liberalism, but under a new flag.

The success of this American *coup d'état* is signalled by the narrative twist that follows the Ballet sequence. Immediately before the Ballet, Lise gets into a car with Henri, having told Jerry that she and Henri are leaving the next day for the United States to get married and tour Henri's show. Immediately after the Ballet, Lise gets out of the car, kisses Henri goodbye and runs to Jerry. Jerry has always been a painter, but it is only when his cinematic dancing reanimates the work of French artists that Lise finally chooses him. A contemporary critic recognised this victory for cinema and movement:

The new ballet... is a fantasy with a stylised Paris background which belongs unmistakably to the cinema; from the opening against the sketch of a sad Verlaine-like park to the raffish bar-room scenes, it has been composed of a moving pattern in which décor is part of the movement.

anon., 1951, page unknown

The work of the French Impressionists and Post-Impressionists has been reduced to "background" and "décor", within a new world order driven by the power of cinematic movement to requisition and reposition history and culture.

This is not to attribute to Kelly (or to Minnelli) a disrespect for the art of Europe; his interests were merely in the potential of the cinematic medium for dance, as he told Dance Magazine in 1962:

soon after my first picture I realised that no director in Hollywood was seriously interested in developing the cinematic possibilities of the dance. No one cared about finding new technologies or improving the old ones. I decided that would be my work.

Kelly cited in Billman, 1997, 66

Part of this fascination with the cinematic was the possibility of a movement away from the two-dimensional towards the three-dimensional; in a 1947 interview Kelly lamented the two-dimensionality of the screen, and dreamed of three-dimensional cameras which could give cinematic dance the “kinetic force” of live dance (Kelly cited in Billman, 1997, 87). This was a common complaint about film dance in this period. Jack Cole, another Hollywood choreographer expressed a similar sentiment in 1951:

The difficulty of obtaining presence on screen is enormous. Movement always seems to be under glass, the strange paradox of seeming not real in a medium that is real above all else. The camera obliterates stress and strain and all kinetic drama is lost.

Cole cited in Delamater, 1978, 114

Here, mediation is blamed for what Benjamin would call the loss of aura of live dance. However, in the ‘American in Paris Ballet’ and in much of Kelly’s work, this nostalgia was transformed into a celebration of the capacity of mass mediated film to reproduce and augment the irrational attraction and liberation of live dance. Adorno’s critique of mass culture is converted into Benjamin’s appreciation of the liberatory potential of film. The ‘American in Paris Ballet’



recognises the skill of late nineteenth-century French painters in harnessing this irrational aesthetic, by depicting the cancan for example, and repeats the same act of appropriation through the contemporary medium of film, but this time with three dimensions, movement and sound.

Kelly did not necessarily envisage his championing of cinematic dance as part of an Americanisation of European art that supported the nation's claim for cultural supremacy. However, his work certainly corresponded with this movement, and his success may have been due at least in part to this resonance between the personal and the political. In retrospect, critics such as Hilary de Vries writing in the Los Angeles Times in 1994, have recognised Kelly's contribution to the global shift in the cultural wellspring: "Kelly remade dance on film from a European art form into an American one" (de Vries cited in Billman, 1997, 66). In An American in Paris, the filmed cancan was conceived not as a trigger for a regression into the irrational, primitive, unconscious, as it had been in the 1920s European cancan films, but as an image of liberalism that could be lifted out of history, and made to perform its connotative work for a new, American master.

#### **5.4: Moulin Rouge (1952)**

After An American in Paris, two cancan films were produced which portrayed the cinematic appropriation of the French past more ambivalently. This ambivalence may reflect the fact that, as Guilbaut notes, "in 1952 modernism seemed to be totally divided, split into a hard and a soft look, between Peace and Freedom, between form and content, between Paris and New York" (Guilbaut,

1990, 73), and between an aesthetic based on a progression from irrationality to rationality, around which Paris's cultural and artistic dominance had been built, and the new aesthetic of appropriation. Fittingly, one of these films was directed by an American, while the other was directed by a Frenchman. The first of these was Moulin Rouge (1952), a British production choreographed by the British dancer William Chappell, but directed by the American John Huston. Moulin Rouge, like An American in Paris, performed a political appropriation of Toulouse-Lautrec's images of the cancan, but it also critiqued the very aesthetic that it employed.

#### *5.4.1: Reanimation and Appropriation*

As a number of commentators (for example, Kaminsky, 1978; Dunant, 1991) have noted, Moulin Rouge followed An American in Paris in employing the technique of reanimating the paintings of Toulouse-Lautrec, but rather than restricting this method to a dance sequence, used it throughout the film. This intention is made clear in the film's opening intertitle:

His palette is caked, his brushes are dry, yet the genius of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec is as fresh and alive as the day he laid them down. Here, for a brief moment, they shall be restored to his hands, and he and his beloved city and his time shall live again.

Many scenes of the film begin with, or move through, three-dimensional moving reconstructions of Toulouse-Lautrec's paintings, including the opening cancan sequence which draws heavily on his Moulin Rouge: La Goulue poster (1891) (Figure 9, p. 155).

As with An American in Paris, this cinematisation of Toulouse-Lautrec's work was generally viewed by contemporary commentators as a celebration of it. For example, Fred Majdalany writes: "With this film Technicolor comes of age and Oswald Morris, Eliot Esosan [sic], Paul Sheriff, and Robert Hessens must all be congratulated on carrying on where the painter himself left off" (Majdalany, no date). However, Miriam Betty White (1981) and Virginia Wright Wexman (1993) have argued, in a similar vein to the argument above regarding An American in Paris, that this apparent glorification hides a political undercurrent.

White (1981) argues that by constructing a cinematic universe that is identical not to the actual world in which Toulouse-Lautrec lived, but to the artistic interpretation of that world in his paintings, the film reduces Toulouse-Lautrec's artistry to merely a direct, realistic representation of his experience. It is the cinematically constructed locale of Montmartre that is colourful, bizarre, caricatured, leaving no room for Toulouse-Lautrec's individual artistic interpretation. This creativity is in fact hijacked by the film itself. Toulouse-Lautrec's artistic mastery becomes the film's cinematic mastery. He becomes an automaton merely responding to the habitat created for him by the omnipotent filmmaker.

Wexman (1993) follows White, but goes further. She attributes this appropriation specifically to the film's American director, John Huston. Wexman argues that Huston, who had previously exhibited his filmic mastery through the representation of masculine force and heroism, in Moulin Rouge realigned his

claim to creative prowess by appropriating the cultural power of the European artist, epitomised by Toulouse-Lautrec, to master the female body by preserving it in art. John Huston casts himself, rather than Toulouse-Lautrec, as the avant-garde bohemian artist, particularly by comparing his use of colour with Toulouse-Lautrec's innovations, dramatised in the film.

Following Guilbaut (1983; 1990), Wexman gives this appropriation political as well as personal significance. She situates this British production as part of a “newly international mode of Hollywood production” and argues that “American values and American profits remained the driving force of such productions” (Wexman, 1993, 168). She aligns Huston's appropriation of Toulouse-Lautrec's artistic mastery with the American attempt to usurp Europe's cultural capital in order to strengthen its position in the Cold War. The individual freedom of expression embodied by the modern French Impressionist and Post-Impressionist painters, is converted into the individual freedom of expression of the filmmaker, and made to represent the individualism and liberalism of American society in general, as against the supposed conformism and totalitarianism of the Soviets. Like An American in Paris, the romantic gender relationship depicted in the film is nationalised: Toulouse-Lautrec is played by José Ferrer, an actor whose public image was American despite his Puerto Rican identity, while his female muse is played by a French actress (Colette Marchand), implicitly aligning both the American filmmaker and the United States itself with the artist's power to harness the irrational. Huston may or may not have been aware of the broader political implications of his work, but his direction of Moulin Rouge can be read as a personal realignment of values in response to a changing global political and

cultural context. As the United States shifted its foreign policy from a reliance on military strength to cultural diplomacy, Huston used the same process to increase his personal prestige as a filmmaker by aligning himself with this new mode of American supremacy.

#### *5.4.2: Auto-critique of the Appropriated Spectacle*

Although Moulin Rouge reproduces the politics of An American in Paris in certain respects, an analysis of the cancan sequences in particular reveals that unlike the latter film, Huston appropriates French strategies of cultural dominance while simultaneously critiquing them, thereby implicitly critiquing his own approach. His cancan sequences, based around Toulouse-Lautrec images, are not unreservedly liberatory, but have a bittersweet edge, implying that the spectacle is not all it seems. Huston's suspicion of spectacle appears to mirror that of the 1920s cancan films which preceded the indulgence in spectacle represented by Busby Berkeley's choreographies of the 1930s. A subtle difference, however, separates the 1920s critiques of mass culture from Moulin Rouge (1952). Whereas the former criticised mass culture for enslaving spectator and performer to primitive, unconscious desires, the latter intoxicates both spectator and performer with an attraction that is ultimately a modern construction, a superficial illusion.

This reflects a crucial shift in conceptions of the rational and the irrational in the mid-twentieth century. In the early part of century, the view of rationality and irrationality as embedded in a social evolutionary timeline predominated. In the

1920s and 1930s this timeline began to be questioned, by thinkers such as Benjamin, and in the tension between narrative and attraction in the 1920s cancan films. By the 1950s this model was being rapidly replaced by the notion that the rational and the irrational were merely artificial constructions that could be utilised or discarded at will<sup>5</sup>. While musicals continued to employ irrational attractions, they could no longer do so uncynically, without acknowledging their status as artifice. Rick Altman (1987) and Jane Feuer (1993) have noted this shift in the film musicals of the 1950s towards “critical reflexivity” or “auto-critique” (Feuer, 1993, 107), citing films such as A Star is Born (1954). In films featuring the cancan, whose relationship with notions of the rational and irrational was inextricable, this shift was particularly stark. The cancan sequences in Moulin Rouge (1952) exemplify this trend.

The cancan appears in the opening and closing scenes of Moulin Rouge, the former set in the Moulin Rouge of 1890, and the latter depicting Toulouse-Lautrec’s deathbed in 1901. The opening scene includes two cancan sequences. The first reanimates Toulouse-Lautrec’s Moulin Rouge: La Goulue poster (1891), for which the artist is depicted making preliminary sketches during the performance, and the production of which is dramatised later in the film. By using only four dancers, as would have been the case at the Moulin Rouge, and emphasising the individuality of the dancers through costuming, characterisation, and solo sections in the choreography, the choreographer, William Chappell, marks this out as a *fin-de-siècle* cancan, as opposed to the homogenisation, unison and precision of the 1920s French Cancan. Competition and cat-fighting between the two female dancers provide justification for Toulouse-Lautrec’s

later comment that the Moulin Rouge is, “a jungle where people prowl like wild animals”. But Toulouse-Lautrec is shown to possess the capacity to convert this irrational spectacle into art. This sequence therefore leaves the social evolutionary distinction between rational and irrational bodies intact.

This primitivist interpretation of the cancan, however, is challenged in the performance that closes the scene, which is performed by six female dancers in almost identical costumes, emphasising unison and choreography. Halfway through the routine, the camera cuts from the dancers performing a series of kicks in linear formation to Toulouse-Lautrec drawing a sketch that is reminiscent of his poster *La Troupe de Mademoiselle Églantine* (1896) (Figure 16). The choreography appears to reanimate this famous lithograph, which was commissioned by Jane Avril for a run of performances by herself and three other cancan dancers at the Palace Theatre, London (Price, 1998, 59). While Toulouse-Lautrec emphasises the individuality of the dancers’ faces, their linear formation and unison movement contrasts with his other depictions of the cancan. This might be attributed to the changes the dancers may have made to the dance for their London engagement. David Price speculates that they may have been required to “tone down” (Price, 1998, 59) their act for London audiences. Furthermore, the proscenium arch format of the London theatre with its single ‘front’ may have necessitated the linearization of the *quadrille naturaliste*, which was normally performed on the dance floor ‘in the round’ at Parisian cabarets.



**Figure 16: La Troupe de Mademoiselle Églantine by Toulouse Lautrec (1896)**

An alternative explanation for the linearity and unison of the poster, however, is Toulouse-Lautrec's source material. Although Moulin Rouge depicts Toulouse-Lautrec sketching the dancers 'from life', Price notes that the source for the lithograph was in fact a photograph of the dancers posed with their legs and skirts raised. Cameras that could capture movement were not yet widely available in the 1890s, necessitating this static position. Toulouse-Lautrec used his experience of watching dancers at the Moulin Rouge to transform this static pose into an illusion of captured movement, but the linear arrangement of the dancers may reflect their reorientation of the dance towards the camera's eye. A similar linearization can be seen in early cancan films, such as Moulin Rouge Dancers (1898). If the choreography of the Moulin Rouge sequence is based on



this lithograph, as the cut to Toulouse-Lautrec's sketch suggests, then the choreography reanimates not just the poster itself, but the early rationalisation of the dance under the gaze of foreign spectators and visual technologies. In reconstructing the dance from this source, Chappell choreographed a routine that bore more resemblance to the rationalised French Cancan of the 1920s than the *quadrille naturaliste* of the 1890s. As such it suggests the mass production of irrationality that began at the Moulin Rouge in the 1890s, but became more obvious as the cancan became rationalised in the twentieth century. Unlike the previous cancan, in which irrationality appeared to arise naturally in the bodies of the cancan dancers, here irrationality is a manufactured commodity.

The sequence creates a crescendo of excitement, focusing particularly on the spectacle of female legs, in order to create the greatest possible contrast with the moments after the dance has finished, when the spectators go home and Toulouse-Lautrec slides from his chair to reveal for the first time that he is a dwarf. As the camera zooms out, lingering on the diminutive artist leaving the dance hall alone while cleaning ladies mop the floor, the spectacle is revealed as artifice constructed to provide momentary release from loneliness and deformity. The dance now appears at best decadent, frivolous, and trivial, at worst a mirage that only heightens the shock of the return to reality, like the alcohol that Toulouse-Lautrec consumes throughout the scene, and that eventually contributes to his premature death.

This critique of spectacle re-emerges towards the end of the film, when Toulouse-Lautrec and his companion Myriamme find the aged, drunken La Goulue in the street trying to convince a disbelieving crowd that she was the

famous La Goulue of the Moulin Rouge. Although she still attempts a high kick, her cancaning body is lost to time, drink and poverty. Toulouse-Lautrec links La Goulue's fate to his own and that of the Moulin Rouge: "They say men destroy the thing they love most. My posters did their part in destroying the Moulin. With great success it became a spectacle. There was no place for La Goulue, or any of us". The attempt to harness the irrationality of the cancan for commercial purposes, he implies, made the Moulin Rouge into a spectacle whose relentless mass production overrode the fate of the individuals involved in it. However, if Huston identified himself, and American foreign politics, with the character of Toulouse-Lautrec, as Wexman argues, then this critique of spectacle contains an implicit critique of the attempt by both Huston and the United States to harness French liberalism for personal and political purposes. Like many film musicals of the 1950s, Moulin Rouge deconstructs its own premises.

#### *5.4.3: Cinematic Image as Ghost*

The hallucinatory, ephemeral, but intoxicating status of the spectacle is reaffirmed in the closing scene of the film. Toulouse-Lautrec, lying on his deathbed in 1901, is visited by ghosts of the dancers who performed live at the Moulin Rouge in the opening scene set in 1890, both in the opening number, and the French Cancan sequence. A number of Moulin Rouge-related images which utilise the figure of the ghost were produced in the 1950s. For example, Paul Mahé's designs for the décor of the refurbished Moulin Rouge of 1951 include an image of Toulouse-Lautrec sketching, surrounded by distorted, ghostly images of the dancers he drew. Furthermore, a poster for the Moulin Rouge

produced in the 1950s features a cancan dancer framed by ghostly sketches of La Goulue and Valentin le Désossé (see Pessis and Crepineau, 1990 for reproductions of both images). If a ghost is the past re-embodied in the present as an image, then these spectres evoke not only Toulouse-Lautrec's painted images of the cancan, but also the appropriation of these paintings, in turn, as moving images by 1950s filmmakers. Through visual representations, bodies from the past can be captured and continue to haunt the present and the future.

Jo Labanyi, drawing on Jacques Derrida's work on ghostliness, describes ghosts as, "the return of that which history has repressed" (Labanyi, no date [online]). The ghostly cancan dancers in the final scene of Moulin Rouge signify not just the return of Toulouse-Lautrec's history as a hallucination before his death, but the return of the irrationality of the cancan dancer, repressed in the modernising rationalisation of the early twentieth century which reached its peak in the 1920s, and revived as a figure of liberal politics in the 1950s. Majdalany echoed the term used by Ernst Jentsch (1996) and Sigmund Freud (1990) to describe the re-emergence of the irrational from within the rational, when he wrote in a review of Moulin Rouge in 1953, "[o]ne by one his characters, familiar to us through the posters and pastels, come uncannily to life" (Majdalany, 1953). The ghosts of the final scene visually represent the uncanny manner in which Moulin Rouge, like the early cinema of attractions, brings static images of the cancan to life, allowing their repressed irrationality to be reignited for a different purpose.

However, these ghosts do not make history manifest in its original form; their dancing is not an exact reproduction of the choreography of the opening scene.

Rather, certain moments are selected, fragmented, condensed and re-ordered, simulating the action of memory. Some elements are completely new and refer only to Toulouse-Lautrec's present, such as the words of goodbye spoken by some of the dancers, but these appear as part of the ghostly memory as well. Other elements from the opening scene are completely absent. It is this process of fragmentation and condensation through the superimposition of a past image on a new present that constitutes Benjamin's (1973a) radical notion of history as a non-linear construction, and on which the new aesthetic of appropriating the past as an image was based.

Elsewhere, Benjamin claims that this liberating capacity to reproduce the past in a new form, and therefore liquidate its aura, is "most palpable in the great historical films" (Benjamin, 1973b, 215). The act of haunting mirrors the cinematic process in its ability to make the past manifest in the present. This is the case for any film, as all films bring the past moment of shooting into the present moment of viewing, but in the case of historical films, such as Moulin Rouge, which also refer to a past prior to the moment of shooting, this sense of haunting is doubled. Yuriko Furuhashi (2004) traces the connection between the cinema and the ghost back to late eighteenth-century phantasmagoria which used magic lanterns to make ghostly apparitions appear and disappear. She argues that the ghost is present in cinema not just as a theme, but as inherent to the apparatus itself, which projects the past onto the present as an image. Cinema's ghostliness becomes most evident in films that use the aesthetic of attractions, in which the film medium's uncanny ability to make the past manifest in the present is used to induce a physical reaction in the viewer. The ghosts of Moulin Rouge dancers in

the death-bed scene literalise cinema's capacity to resurrect the dead through the moving image.

However, as in the opening scene, the harnessing of the cancan as a mass produced image is also subject to critique. This critique follows Benjamin's observation that the liberation from linear conceptions of time and space that the mass medium of film allows, is accompanied by a sense of loss of authenticity. According to Derrida, "[t]here is something disappeared, departed in the apparition itself as reapparition of the departed" (Derrida, 1994, 6). In this case, the characters whose ghosts we see are not necessarily dead, but the time, youth, and context of their earlier performance has passed, embodied by the physical decline of both La Goulue and Toulouse-Lautrec. Therefore, the death commemorated by the ghosts is not so much a human death (although it is represented by the death of Toulouse-Lautrec), but the death of a particular historically and culturally specific performance form and the medium through which it was captured. This scene fulfils Toulouse-Lautrec's prophesy that the spectacularisation of the Moulin Rouge through his posters would lead to the death of the live cancan, and the death of painting, represented by his own death. The cancan would return as a cinematic image, but one haunted by the ghost of its live predecessor.

Moulin Rouge, like An American in Paris, reanimates the paintings and posters of Toulouse-Lautrec as a means of appropriating his mastery of the liberal, irrational cancan. This act of appropriation is portrayed both as a liberation from linear notions of time and space, allowing a powerful manipulation of history,

and as the mass production of an illusion which temporarily obscures reality. In the 1950s, the new aesthetic of appropriation was caught halfway between the modernist paradigm, which conceived of it in linear historical terms as either loss or regression, and incipient postmodernism, which would embrace its fragmentation of chronology.

### **5.5: French Cancan (1955)**

The second mid-1950s cancan film to treat the cinematic appropriation of the French past ambivalently was French Cancan (1955), a French production directed by Jean Renoir and choreographed by Claude Grandjean. As a French film, French Cancan was obviously positioned differently in relation to Cold War politics than An American in Paris and Moulin Rouge. However, Renoir's national affiliations were complicated; he participated in the creation of a French national cinema in the 1930s, but spent the fifteen years prior to making French Cancan, including the period of the occupation, living and working in Hollywood. Furthermore, French Cancan was made during a period when French perceptions of the influence of American culture ranged from the liberatory connotations that de Beauvoir attached to American soldiers (see section 5.2), to fears of enslavement (see Guilbaut, 1983). Influenced by the complex Franco-American relationship in which both Renoir and France were engaged, the cancan in French Cancan, appears to be viewed through the eyes of both a French nationalist and a tourist simultaneously.

### 5.5.1: Nationalism in French Cancan

Naomi Greene (1999) argues that French cinema and French national identity have been intimately intertwined since their birth during the same period in the late-nineteenth century<sup>6</sup>. However, after the Second World War, the cinema in France became a particularly visible and tangible focus for French fears of Americanisation and of the consequent loss of national identity. This is evident at an early stage in the French response to the Blum-Byrnes Accord, signed in 1946, in which the United States offered France economic assistance in return for various cultural and ideological concessions, such as weakening the limitations on the importation of American films. Guilbaut (1983) argues that this was a deliberate ploy on the part of the United States to spread anti-Communist rhetoric in France. Although the French press was generally in favour of the accord, several critics writing in *Le Monde* in 1946 condemned the cinema clause as an attack on French culture (Jouvet cited in Guilbaut, 1983, 137) and the start of a shift in the global balance of cultural power from France to the United States (Gilson cited in Guilbaut, 1983, 138). This reflected widespread French public criticism of the cinema clause, manifested in petitions, demonstrations and street violence. These fears for the future of the French film industry were confirmed when more than half of its employees lost their jobs in 1947 and 1948 (Guilbaut, 1983).

Janet Bergstrom (1996) argues that the film *French Cancan*, must be seen in the context of this post-war French fear of cultural loss. She contends that Renoir's films of the 1930s had been perceived to embody the contemporary French

political and cultural *zeitgeist*, and participated in the construction of French national cinema. Furthermore, according to André Bazin in 1952, “everything about the man [Renoir] and his work seemed to stand in contradiction to the American cinema: their attitude to film production, the style of their films. Renoir represented the French cinema” (Bazin cited in Bergstrom, 1996, 254). However, during the war Renoir left France for Hollywood, where he continued to make films, and remained until 1954. This was seen by some as a national betrayal. French Cancan was the first film Renoir made on his return to France (although he never lived there permanently again). He claimed that the film was intended to create “a nice bridge between myself and French audiences” (Renoir, 1989, 98) after his absence. In the context of French fears of Americanisation, particularly in film, and the feelings of betrayal surrounding Renoir’s prolonged exile in Hollywood, Bergstrom argues that in order to renew his status in the eyes of the French film industry, critics and public, Renoir needed, “to make a film that was simple, positive, and self-evidently French”. She continues, “[a]ll this he achieved” (Bergstrom, 1996, 478).

Many features of French Cancan do indeed resist Americanism and promote the idea of a unique, historically grounded French identity. As Bergstrom points out, the film critiques the touristification of Montmartre and foreign investment in French enterprise (Bergstrom, 1996, 484). Furthermore, Raymond Durgnat (1974) notes that the references to the Franco-Russian alliance and the welcoming of Russian naval troops in the final cancan scene are slightly anachronistic, suggesting that Renoir deliberately incorporated these events in order to allude to contemporary robust Franco-Russian relations despite the



American stance in the Cold War<sup>7</sup>. The orientation of the story around the cancan itself suggests an attempt to depict a uniquely French cultural history, and the adornment of the Moulin Rouge with French flags for the cancan finale connects the revival of the cancan in the 1890s with the nationalism of the *fin-de-siècle* period. Although, like An American in Paris and Moulin Rouge, French Cancan constructs the primary male/female relationship (that between Danglard and Nini) as that between artist and muse, both characters and actors are French, rather than representing a Franco-American union.

#### *5.5.2: Dislocation and Nostalgia*

Despite the explicit references to French nationalism in French Cancan, Renoir's attempts to reaffirm French identity also involved a form of dislocation from his pre-war identification with the French nation. Before the war Renoir claimed, "I know that I am French and that I must work in an absolutely national vein" (Renoir cited in Bergstrom, 1996, 456). Georges Sadoul, in his critique of French Cancan in 1955, described Renoir's pre-war films as, "[t]he liaison of the great creator with his nation and his people" in that he, "expressed the mood of his day" (Sadoul cited in Bergstrom, 1996, 482), and Bergstrom describes them as "signs of their time" (Bergstrom, 1996, 455). Therefore, these films were both created and viewed as deeply embedded in their historical and national context. However, by 1955, Renoir was irreparably dislocated from his nation. His solution to this dilemma was to refer back to a moment of shared national history in order to repair his bond with the French people.

Renoir's strategy tapped into a general French post-war nostalgia for national security, strength and self-determination, and particularly that represented in pre-war film. Bazin commented in 1951 that the French films of the 1930s "appear to us today with the ideal qualities of a cinematic paradise lost" (Bazin cited in Greene, 1999, 187)<sup>8</sup>. The return of Renoir to France seemed to offer the perfect opportunity to revive the patriotic cinema of the 1930s. To a certain extent, Renoir also wished to return to the national status of his pre-war films. Jean Gabin, who epitomised Renoir's work of the 1930s (Bergstrom, 1996; Greene, 1999), was cast as Danglard in French Cancan, and this was described by Renoir as, "a return to the past, to my companion in Les Bas Fonds, La Grande Illusion and La Bête Humaine" (Renoir, 1974, 268). However, as Bergstrom argues, Renoir's fifteen-year absence from France, and particularly his exile during the occupation, robbed him of both the inclination and the ability to reconnect fully with contemporary France. Therefore, he chose to return to a period prior to the 1930s, in fact prior to all the military conflicts of the twentieth century, the *Belle Époque*, and specifically the revival of the cancan in the build-up to the opening of the Moulin Rouge. Bergstrom argues that this involved:

a double regression, both personal and social, that allowed Renoir to return through fiction to the period and locale of his childhood and the innocence it represented for him, as well as the innocence of France before the Occupation.

Bergstrom, 1996, 460

This is not the unconscious regression described by Freud and Adorno, but a conscious regression in order to salvage lost aura for both personal and political purposes (as in Benjamin, 1973b). The film in many respects idealises the Montmartre of Renoir's childhood as naïve, rural, authentic, and visually

attractive, in implied contrast to the loss of innocence, urbanism and modernisation of post-war France. Similarly, Durnat observes that, “the film’s images are those of a past reality, selective and heightened, as subjectively real, that is, as surreal, as moments polished by memory” (Durnat, 1974, 307). This regression is not a return to authenticity, but an attempt to reconstruct authenticity in retrospect, and to screen out aspects of the past deemed inauthentic, such as the World Wars and the occupation.

The desire to recreate an idealised, authentic past is present in Renoir’s description of the cancan choreography:

The cancan has become a kind of convention, with one leg raised like that: you have to raise a leg, whereas in the beginning, you raised a leg in a movement destined to excite the men in a certain way or to allow for a certain acrobatic gesture. Thanks to these dancers, I think we rediscovered a little of the way things were.

Renoir, 1989, 100

Renoir’s description implies a rejection of the rationalised, conventionalised cancan of the 1920s, in favour of the irrational, improvised, seductive cancan of the 1890s. The *fin-de-siècle* cancan could contribute to Renoir’s effort to reengage with the French people not just through a shared sense of nostalgia, but through its irrational allure, which had been harnessed for nationalist purposes since the 1890s. Indeed, many reviewers, French and otherwise, noted the hypnotic appeal of the cancan sequence. Milton Shulman, writing for the Sunday Express, declared,

I defy anyone to witness the last fifteen minutes of this film – a breathless, abandoned hurricane of white thighs, frenzied petticoats,

black garters, and delirious energy – without experiencing a wave of toe-tapping delight.

Shulman, 1955, page unknown

Renoir hoped this irrational reaction would break down the barriers between himself and his fellow Frenchmen. The intoxication of the spectator that Renoir aimed to induce is embodied in the final shot of the film in which a silhouetted drunk staggers from the Moulin Rouge after the final cancan.

### 5.5.3: *From Nostalgia to Exoticism*

Renoir's nostalgic approach to the French past drew on a tradition in which France had regarded itself as a place of memory, long before the United States constructed it as such (see Nora, 1998). In the nineteenth century, this dialectic between a past, primitive authenticity, and present modern mass culture, had animated French art and society, and guaranteed Paris's cultural dominance. However, in the twentieth century, the United States offered a new aesthetic in which hierarchies between past and present were abolished, leaving history open to appropriation and reconfiguration as images. In order to compete in this new world, without losing its national specificity, images of the French past, particularly from the bohemian culture of *fin-de-siècle* Montmartre, were mass-produced as ready-made tourist publicity (Marling, 2001). For example, the Moulin Rouge was renovated and reopened in 1951, but targeted towards an increasingly international audience, who were offered a conveniently packaged "dinner-show" (Pessis and Crepineau, 1990, 159). The cancan was included on the programme, but it took the form not of the *quadrille naturaliste* of the 1890s, but the French Cancan of the 1920s. By performing the version of the dance

influenced by the American chorus line, and using the name given to the dance in England to attract the crowds of the 1860s (Price, 1998, 37), the post-war *Moulin Rouge* exhibited France as seen through the tourist gaze. Renoir's construction of the French past in French Cancan makes a similar, subtle shift from nostalgia into exoticism.

Although Renoir wanted to reconnect with French audiences, he did not intend to live permanently in France again. He felt, "in danger of becoming as much of an outsider on the Place Pigalle as on Sunset Boulevard" (Renoir cited in Bergstrom, 1996, 473-74). Renoir's response in 1955 to the question of which country he preferred was, "I belong to the nationality of the spectacle" (Renoir cited in Bergstrom, 1996, 487). Here, Renoir uses the notion of spectacle to subsume the complexities of his nationality. This is not to say that spectacle is unproblematic for Renoir, but rather that it represents a shift away from the grounding of personal identity in national origin, and towards a more transient, performed identity. Renoir's assertion of Frenchness in French Cancan represents just such as performance, constructed using the filming and narrative techniques used by his American colleagues on An American in Paris and Moulin Rouge. The influence of the former is suggested by Renoir's original casting of Leslie Caron, the An American in Paris star of French and American parentage, as Nini (Price, 1998)<sup>9</sup>. Renoir paradoxically declares his Frenchness by using the new American aesthetic of appropriation.

The first technique Renoir shares with the American directors is the reference to French Impressionist and Post-Impressionist painting. Although Renoir does not

cinematically reconstruct these paintings as the American filmmakers do, many commentators have noted that Renoir's depiction of Paris recalls that of his father, Auguste Renoir, and the other Impressionists (for example, Bazin, 1973; Durgnat, 1974; Dunant, 1991; Bergstrom, 1996). Bazin (1973) argues that while Huston copied these paintings, Renoir instead evoked their style, their artistic vision. But this act is not politically neutral as Bazin implies. Renoir merely frames his act of appropriation of the past as an assertion of continuity. Bergstrom (1996) argues that by making stylistic reference to the Impressionists, and particularly his father, Renoir places himself as the natural inheritor of the French cultural mastery that their paintings represented. But Renoir had left the location (France) and medium (painting) of his father's success, creating a personal relationship to his artistic heritage that involved both continuity and rupture. For instance, in his memoirs he recounts that in his early career, he had to sell the paintings left to him by his father in order to pay for the production of his films, a literal conversion of static art into cinematic art, but one that generated a huge sense of loss of the past (Renoir, 1974, 85). Renoir's attempt to reconnect with this past, both through French Cancan and the book about his father that he started in 1953, just before he returned to France, was from a position of disjuncture rather than continuity. Furthermore, his reconstruction of the French past had political and commercial motives as well as personal ones. It was therefore more closely aligned with the techniques of his American colleagues than Bazin might admit.

A technique Renoir shared with Huston was the analogy between his own directorial mastery and the artistic mastery of his *fin-de-siècle* male protagonist.

While Huston drew an analogy between himself and Toulouse-Lautrec, Renoir compares his artistry with that of Danglard, the impresario who buys the Moulin Rouge and nurtures its female performers, and who is modelled on Joseph Oller, the original owner of the Moulin Rouge. Bergstrom notes several parallels between Renoir and Danglard: “his age, his trade, even his leg injury” (1996, 485). Furthermore, like both Huston and Minnelli, Renoir constructs his male lead in the romantic mould as an artist who creates art out of the raw material of the female body. In the scene preceding the cancan finale, Danglard forcibly justifies his multiple and constant infidelities to Nini by arguing that his role is as a discoverer and cultivator of women for public entertainment. He asks, “what do I create? You! Her!”. Renoir appropriates Oller’s power to harness the irrational body for commercial and nationalist ends, through the mediator of Danglard.

A further parallel between Renoir and the character of Danglard highlights Renoir’s touristic appropriation of Paris and the cancan. Both succeed artistically and commercially by performing an act of what Marta Savigliano (1995) calls ‘autoexoticism’, turning an external, exoticising gaze back upon one’s own national identity<sup>10</sup>. The film begins with a performance at Danglard’s current establishment, *Le Paravent Chinois* (The Chinese Screen), of an Oriental dance by La Belle Arabesse. This establishes an Orientalising gaze both for Danglard’s cabaret audience, and Renoir’s film audience. However, both Danglard and Renoir recognise the desire of their audiences (both French and international) to turn this Orientalising gaze upon France, to see a representation of ‘authentic’ Frenchness. Therefore, both salvage the cancan from French cultural history (in Danglard’s case, from the working class dance halls of the 1830s, and in

Renoir's case, from the cabarets of the 1890s), choreographically rework it, and re-present it as a national dance form, the French Cancan. In both cases, this reworking is carried out by a French choreographer, Madame Guibolle for Danglard, and Claude Grandjean for Renoir<sup>11</sup>. But both Danglard and Renoir authorise (in both senses) the resulting choreography, provide the medium for its performance (the Moulin Rouge and the film French Cancan, respectively), and allow the credit for recreating French culture to accrue to themselves.

The choice of the English term French Cancan for both Danglard's dance and Renoir's film, confirms the role of the tourist gaze in their construction. The autoexoticism implied by this terminology is evident in Madame Guibolle's observation that "[t]hey only go for English names now", which inspires Danglard's naming of the dance. The English impresario Charles Morton, coined the term in order to market the dancing of the Hungarian Kiralfy family at his Oxford music hall (Price, 1998, 37), and the French choreographer Pierre Sandrini, later used the term to describe the chorus-line influenced version of the dance he presented at the Moulin Rouge in the 1920s. By following this nomenclature, Danglard and Renoir reveal their exoticisation of the dance as an embodiment of essentialised Frenchness, deployed for commercial and political purposes. Indeed, despite Renoir's claim to have, "rediscovered a little of the way things were [in the 1890s]" (Renoir, 1989, 100), the cancan choreographed by Grandjean in fact draws heavily on the French Cancan of the 1920s, featuring a multitude of dancers who perform a highly choreographed routine, frequently in linear formations.



Renoir's and Huston's exoticisation of French culture also historicises it, placing it in the past as opposed to the American present. Guilbaut notes that as American artists attempted to gain artistic independence from French dominance, "Paris was depicted as an aging coquette, no longer strong enough to act but only to dress up, to seem" (Guilbaut, 1983, 241). Moulin Rouge (1952) performs this aging of Paris through the deterioration of La Goulue from a young dancer to an old, drunken beggar, who Toulouse-Lautrec saves from a jeering crowd. French Cancan includes a similar character, a beggar called Prunelle whom Dangelard describes to Nini as, "Queen of the Cancan. The toast of Paris before you were born". Like Toulouse-Lautrec in Moulin Rouge, Dangelard helps Prunelle, giving her some money; by analogy, Renoir, like Huston, supports and revives the memory of *fin-de-siècle* Paris. However, the presence of Prunelle also implies that the original Parisian cancan is past, that the present belongs to the new, revived cancan, appropriated and reworked from its past source, and attributable to Dangelard and Renoir.

#### *5.5.4: Critique and Defence of Harnessing the Cancan*

Like Huston, Renoir's harnessing of the cancan dancer as an attraction is not uncritical. For example, while the Moulin Rouge is nostalgically idealised, its establishment as a business centred on spectacle is also depicted as disrupting the rural idyll of Montmartre. It destroys Nini's innocence, as she sleeps with Paulo in order to prepare for her job as a cancan dancer, it turns the Reine Blanche into a building site, and it represents a culture of appearances that is critiqued in the dialogue throughout the film. Furthermore, it requires the disciplining of the

bodies of young French girls. The film follows the gradual, painful, repetitive process of training the cancan dancers who perform in the final scene. Although these scenes are comical, they reveal the construction of performing bodies and the choreographic process in a way that, Feuer (1993) argues, was uncommon in earlier Hollywood musicals of the 1930s and 1940s, which attempted to deny their own mass mediation by portraying performance as spontaneous. Like Michel Foucault (1991), who would, in the following decades, point out the extent to which the rational body was not natural but constructed, Renoir portrays the cancan not as a natural outpouring of irrationality, as most cinematic portrayals of the cancan up to that point had implied. This includes Renoir's own previous depiction of the cancan in Nana (1926), in which the dance marked the start of the degeneration of the irrational nineteenth-century prostitute into illness and death<sup>12</sup>. Instead, Nini's performance at the end of French Cancan is dependent on her submission to a network of power in which control over her body and her relationships must be sacrificed to the demands of the masses. This is made evident in Danglard's speech to Nini immediately before the final cancan.

Unlike Foucault, however, Renoir does not portray the disciplining of the body, and its entanglement in networks of power as necessarily enslaving. The ebullience of the final scene, and Nini's decision not to give up the cancan, suggest the liberation that can be found within these power structures, which remain ever present through frequent cuts to Danglard, first alone and nervous backstage, and then, proudly, in the audience. Durnat (1974) argues that this

liberation is not purely physical, but challenges the gendered system of power within which it exists:

The dancers unleash the insolence not only of proletarian energy, but of the aggressive female, and storm the nineteenth-century bourgeois male patriarchy like the light brigade of sexual suffragettes which they are.

Durgnat, 1974, 314

This notion of liberation within an enslaving system is embodied in the cancan choreography, which refers to the mass choreography of the 1920s French Cancan, while maintaining its focus on an individual, Nini. In constructing the cancan in this way, Renoir and Grandjean negotiated the physical dilemma raised in Moulin Rouge (1952) of how to harness the cancan's liberatory irrationality while maintaining post-war scepticism of irrationality as a social evolutionary concept. They also avoid the inverse problem of representing the cancan as a purely enslaving phenomenon, and thereby invoking the totalitarian model of the body. These choreographic challenges paralleled the predicament of American Cold War politics, trapped between the under-rationalised body of mass consumer culture and the over-rationalised totalitarian body. Moulin Rouge escaped this impasse by depicting two cancans in the opening sequence, a *fin-de-siècle* cancan which indulged in the biological irrationality of the cancan dancer, and a 1920s cancan, in which the mass production of irrationality rendered the dancers anonymous. In French Cancan, however, these connotations are avoided by presenting mass choreography, which has been shown to be the product of training rather than social evolution, and in which the individual maintains her agency. Nini represents the individual finding liberation *within* the power structures of mass culture.

Guilbaut argues that the United States reconciled the dilemma of Cold War body politics through a similar “ideology of individualism” (Guilbaut, 1990, 37), gleaned from late nineteenth-century French artists. The notion of the individual refers both to the bourgeois rational body, separated from others, and escape from the regimented totalitarian body, and therefore avoids the pitfalls of both irrationalism and rationalism. By reconstructing *fin-de-siècle* French painterly culture, Renoir found a way to reconnect with contemporary French nostalgia while cultivating an identity for himself, through Danglard, that tallied with the Cold War American ideal. Bergstrom notes the irony that, “Renoir needed to go back to France to make the kind of American success he so much wanted, for French Cancan would qualify as a perfectly respectable Hollywood film” (Bergstrom, 1996, 487). France gave Renoir the material on which to use the aesthetic of appropriation that was being explored by the American filmmakers, and that would develop in the following decades into the postmodern aesthetic. However, by deploying this aesthetic for the purposes of a dislocated Frenchman, Renoir pre-empts its eventual expansion beyond American Cold War politics.

### **5.6: Can-Can (1960)**

Can-Can was the last of the post-war cancan films. Like An American in Paris, it had both an American director, Walter Lang, and an American choreographer, Hermes Pan, and it represented the high point of the American appropriation of the cancan and its French imagery. In 1956 the American art historian Meyer Schapiro had written:

American artists are very much aware of a change in atmosphere since the war: they feel more self-reliant and often say that the center of art has shifted from Paris to New York, not simply because New York has become the chief market for modern art, but because they believe that the newest ideas and energies are there and that America shows the way. It is easy to suppose that this new confidence of American artists is merely a reflex of national economic and political strength, but the artists in question are not all chauvinistic or concerned with politics – they would reject any proposal that they use their brushes for a political end.

Schapiro cited in Guilbaut, 1983, 208-09

Similarly, in film, American political strength was translated into confidence in the aesthetic of appropriation that American directors had been developing throughout the decade. In Can-Can, more than in An American in Paris or Moulin Rouge, the liberal connotations of the cancan are divorced from French sources, and subsumed into a narrative fantasy of American Cold War politics. Can-Can was a film adaptation of the Cole Porter musical by the same name that opened on Broadway in 1953, during the height of the post-war American interest in *fin-de-siècle* Paris. Can-Can builds on the American appropriation of French liberalism in the early 1950s and completes the transatlantic relocation of these values, particularly via its reworking of cancan choreography.

Like Moulin Rouge and the cancan section of the ‘American in Paris Ballet’, the starting point for the theatrical production of Can-Can was the work of Toulouse-Lautrec, some of whose lithographs the co-producer, Cy Feuer, had brought back from Europe at the end of the war (Peck, 1953). Like Kelly and Huston, Can-Can’s producers wanted to bring Toulouse-Lautrec’s depictions to life, creating, “a musical comedy version of what Toulouse-Lautrec accomplished in art” (Martin cited in Peck, 1953, 2). But rather than making their pictorial sources

visible in the film, Can-Can's writer and director, Abe Burrows, moved away from this point of origin.

In researching the production in Paris, Burrows and another co-producer, Ernie Martin, became interested in the censorship of the cancan: "there was in that era pressure not to do the kind of dancing they were doing. Censors often stood right in the dance hall and if a girl went 'too far', they would stop her right in the middle of a step" (Martin cited in Peck, 1953, 2). Martin appears to be referring to article 330 of the Penal Code regarding public decency which was applied to the cancan in the late 1820s and 1830s, but he elides the fact that this law was no longer enforced in the case of the cancan by the 1890s, when Can-Can is set. Nevertheless, Burrows and Martin constructed the narrative around a French law banning "lewd and lascivious" dancing, such as the cancan. But Burrows' explanation of his interest in this issue suggests an alternative reason for this choice of narrative focus:

This idea of a censorship drive fascinated me. I'm an anti-censorship fellow and when I read of the censorship of these girls, my hackles rose. There were about fifteen purity leagues in France then, with names like The National Congress Against Pornography and The League Against Sidewalk Licentiousness. It's hard to believe about France; everyone thinks it's a stronghold of freedom and libertinism, all oo-la-la. But the French were as influenced by Victorianism as anyone else. A middle-class Frenchman can be a pretty strait-laced fellow.

Burrows cited in Peck, 1953

Seen in the context of the massive cultural impact of the anti-Communist censorship of the House Un-American Activities Committee in the 1950s, particularly in the entertainment industry, Burrows' claim to be an "anti-

“censorship fellow” suggests the role of the contemporary American political situation in the choice of a narrative focus for Can-Can. Burrows’ concern with the hidden intolerance in a nation founded on democratic ideals seems to resonate with liberal resistance to the Communist ‘witch-hunt’ in the United States in the 1950s. The narrative of Can-Can, which culminates in the victory of the liberal cancan over its conservative opponents, seems to say more about the early Cold War context of the construction of American politics as liberal in opposition to the Communist bloc, than about the musical’s purported subject matter.

In the reworking of Can-Can for the screen, this focus on contemporary American issues was sharpened. In the film, the focus shifts from the relationship between the female owner of the *Bal du Paradis* cabaret and the judge who seeks to ban the cancan, to that between the cabaret owner and her defence lawyer. Thus both the hero and heroine are now on the side of liberalism, set against more conservative characters, such as the judge and the president of the League Against Filthy Dancing. Furthermore, both the liberal, romantic protagonists are played by American Hollywood stars, Shirley MacLaine (Simone) and Frank Sinatra (François), whose American accents constantly remind the audience of their nationality, while the judge and the president of the League are played by European actors.

Through the American film musical device of a parallel between the success of the romantic couple and the success of the show (Altman, 1987), a connection is drawn between the 1950s American liberalism represented by the Hollywood

actors and 1890s Parisian liberalism represented by the cancan, and the success of both is made to appear natural, inevitable, and desirable. Both are depicted as under threat from an external force that is petty and intolerant. In the case of the show plot, this is the prudish League Against Filthy Dancing, and in the case of the romantic plot, this is Philippe Forestier, François's rival for Simone and a sympathiser for the League. Philippe plots to have the performance of the cancan at the *Bal du Paradis* photographed to present as evidence at court. Here, photography is aligned with the censorship of the cancan, with the forces that wish to rationalise its unruly body. However, the final, unphotographed cancan is filmed from the frontal position previously occupied by the photographer. Photography, which arrests the cancan, both by capturing its movement and signalling a police raid of the cabaret, is replaced by cinematography, which allows the cancan's movement to continue to its conclusion.

The romantic and political resolutions come within moments of each other at the end of the cancan finale. The cancan is performed by Simone and her dancers before the president of the League Against Filthy Dancing, who will decide if it is indeed "lewd and lascivious". Like the finale of French Cancan, this performance combines mass choreography with a focus on an individual dancer, Simone. A critic wrote in Variety in 1960 that the dancing in Can-Can "owes more to Las Vegas of 1960 than Paris of the 1890s" (Price, 1998, 163). The dancing is thus identified both with a particularly American combination of mass culture and individualism, evident in Las Vegas and its shows, and with the American aesthetic of appropriation, carried out firstly by the Las Vegas shows, and secondly by Can-Can. This Americanisation is compounded by the focus on



MacLaine, the Hollywood star. By dancing the cancan (whose performance her character has campaigned for throughout the film), MacLaine's Americanism is linked to the cancan's liberalism. Cuts from MacLaine to the disapproving expression of the president intensify the opposition between the liberal, cancaning American and the intolerant European. However, as the dance continues, the president is gradually won over. When MacLaine approaches her at the end of the dance to discover the verdict, the president declares that rather than banning the dance she wishes to learn it. In the following and final scene, François proposes to Simone, romantically uniting the two Americans. The 'happy ending' can only be achieved when the illiberal minority has been converted to the American liberal values represented by the cancan.

This construction of the victory of liberalism as a 'happy ending', can be read as the apogee of the American appropriation of French liberalism through the cancan that began in An American in Paris. Whereas in the latter the cancan appeared within the context of a homage to Toulouse-Lautrec, separated from the main narrative within a dream sequence, in Can-Can, the dance is divorced from its previous French representations and subsumed completely within a Hollywood narrative of freedom and romance versus oppression and loneliness. Simone's destruction of a Toulouse-Lautrec painting offered as payment at her cabaret, presumably intended to historically locate the action in the 1890s before Toulouse-Lautrec's posthumous fame, can be read in this light as a denial of the French sources that other 1950s cancan films had acknowledged. The liberalism of the cancan is reorientated to represent American cultural and political values in a Hollywoodised, dichotomised, idealised version of the Cold War.

Contemporary film critics recognised this American conquest. Clas Maclaren wrote in Time and Tide in 1960:

Nothing here, or very little, puts us in mind of the Paris of Toulouse-Lautrec, the Paris of Proust, the Paris, for that matter, of Jean Renoir's French Cancan.... Everything is bright, new, custom-built and primarily American.

Maclaren, 1960, page unknown

Paul Dehn linked the Americanisation of the French past to its cinematisation, commenting that, "the American members of the cast in "Can-Can" belong about as much to nineteenth-century France as 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox" (Dehn, 1960).

The visit of the Premier of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev, to the filming of Can-Can at Twentieth-Century Fox Studios in 1959 highlighted the success with which nineteenth-century French definitions of liberalism had been aligned with American values. After witnessing the dancers raise their skirts for photographers at the studio, the following day at a meeting with American trade union leaders Khrushchev used the incident to defend Soviet censorship practices:

[Y]ou and we have different notions of freedom. When we were in Hollywood they danced the cancan for us. The girls who dance it have to pull up their skirts and show their backsides. They are good honest actresses but have to perform that dance. They are compelled to adapt themselves to the tastes of depraved people. People in your country will go to see it, but Soviet people would scorn such a spectacle. It is pornographic. It is the culture of a surfeited and depraved people. Showing that sort of film is called freedom in this country. Such "freedom" doesn't suit us. You seem to like the "freedom" of looking at backsides. But we prefer the freedom to

think, to exercise our mental faculties, the freedom of creative progress.

Khrushchev cited in Linnell, 2006 [online]

Khrushchev differentiates between irrational and rational conceptions of freedom, attributing the former to the United States and the latter to the Soviet Union. By doing so he attempts to use the moral superiority of rational body to claim the moral high ground in the Cold War “battle for men’s minds” (Truman, 1950 [online])<sup>13</sup>. But Khrushchev’s argument simplifies a rather more complex situation. The United States sought alignment not directly with the irrational freedom of the cancan, but with the liberalism of the artists who painted the cancan, and therefore harnessed its irrationality, while maintaining the rational distance afforded by mediation. In Can-Can these French sources are elided, but this is only because the cancan is absorbed so completely into an American narrative frame that the reference to the original French appropriations is deemed unnecessary. Perhaps the fact that Khrushchev saw Can-Can live on set, rather than in its final filmed version, led him to ignore the rationalising effect of cinematic mediation.

However, Khrushchev’s statement does serve to highlight the difference between rational conceptions of freedom, borne in the Enlightenment and redeployed in Communist and fascist politics in the twentieth century, and the definition of freedom propounded in American Cold War politics. While the latter maintained rational distance from the irrational, its claim to offer an alternative to totalitarian politics rested on its embrace of the irrational body. This difference was alluded to by the film critic Iron Adams, who wrote in the Star in 1960, “[w]ithout getting involved in politics let me say that I disagree with Mr. Khrushchev.

About the Can-Can, that is” (Adams, 1960). For Adams, the difference between Khrushchev’s defence of censorship and Can-Can’s anti-censorship message, encapsulated the difference between Soviet Communism and American liberalism.

Of course, not all Americans agreed with the politics embodied in Can-Can. During the 1950s, McCarthy’s hunt for Communist sympathisers used censorship to rationalise the American body politic, eradicating infectious sources of foreign ideology, and Greg Linnell (2006 [online]) argues that Khrushchev’s statement prompted intense debate in American Protestant circles regarding the extent to which the cancan did and should represent American values. However, Can-Can represented the emergence of an American form of popular culture that countered not only the rational definition of freedom propounded by Soviet communism, but also the rational conception of the body as involved in an evolutionary progression on which Adorno’s influential conception of modernism was based, and which remained dominant in both Europe and the United States up to the Second World War.

American filmmakers of the 1950s broke with post-Enlightenment history by cultivating an aesthetic in which rationality and irrationality were not placed in a hierarchy, but were interchangeable and combinable notions. This represented an attempt to carve a path between the dangerously seductive irrational bodies of nineteenth century entertainment, and the dangerously rational bodies associated with totalitarianism. By erasing the hierarchy between rationality and irrationality, these filmmakers dispensed with the Enlightenment notion of

history, based on an evolutionary progression from rationality to irrationality. Instead, rationality and irrationality became alternative constructs which the artist, choreographer or politician could appropriate, depending on their needs. One effect of this was the democratisation of the use of these concepts. While the aesthetic of appropriation was exploited in the 1950s by male American filmmakers, now that bodies were, theoretically, free from the hierarchical labels of rational and irrational, there was nothing to stop others from experimenting with appropriative strategies too. In this chapter the French director Jean Renoir has served to exemplify this trend, but the 1960s would see the explosion of claims to both rational and irrational freedoms both on and off the screen. This diversification of the aesthetic of appropriation would soon become defined by its rejection of the Enlightenment hierarchies upon which modernism had insisted, and therefore become labelled postmodernism.

## **5.7: Conclusion**

After the Second World War, the United States entered a new type of battle – a battle of ideologies. The Cold War required control not over troops and resources, but over culture. American identity, and particularly masculine American identity, became no longer centred on military might, but on the demonstration of liberal individualism through the artistic manipulation of culture and history. The source for this identity was the French Impressionist and Post-Impressionist artists of the late nineteenth century. American filmmakers in the 1950s sought to emulate the ability of these artists to mediate the irrational, particularly that embodied by the cancan dancer, and therefore appropriate their

creative liberalism. In doing so, they constructed a new aesthetic of appropriation, in which rationality and irrationality were detached from their evolutionary meanings, and became images to be utilised or discarded at will.

The first film to cultivate this new identity and aesthetic was An American in Paris (1951). In the 'American in Paris Ballet', ostensibly a homage to six French painters, Kelly asserted the cultural mastery of American dance over the static art of French painting. The cancan was now muse to his artistry, not Toulouse-Lautrec's. Moulin Rouge (1952) also reanimated and appropriated Toulouse-Lautrec's art, but the resulting spectacle was subject to a modernist critique, deemed as inauthentic artifice by the film itself. Nevertheless, this constructed spectacle, free of the evolutionary determinism that still haunted the film, would become the foundation of postmodern aesthetics. A certain ambivalence toward the act of appropriation was also evident in French Cancan (1955). Renoir's reconstruction of the cancan aligned him with both French nostalgia for the *Belle Époque*, and American liberal individualism. But despite Renoir's demonstration of the wider uses of the aesthetic of appropriation, the decade finished with the wholesale absorption of the cancan into a Hollywood Cold War fairytale in Can-Can (1960). Khrushchev's critique of the film testified to the success with which the American appropriation of the power to represent the cancan had helped to construct an alternative to totalitarian ideology. This aesthetic would, in the following decades, participate in the American victory in the battle for men's minds, even if its democratising of the claim to rationality or irrationality would eventually undermine American hegemony by the turn of the millennium.

## **Chapter 6: The Cancan as Virtual Dance: Moulin Rouge! (2001) and the Posthuman Spectator**

### **6.1: Introduction**

The cancan films of the 1950s had pointed towards a major shift in the body politics that the cancan performed. The Enlightenment idea of an historical progression from irrationality to rationality was collapsing. With it came tumbling the modernist idea of an aesthetic hierarchy from mass culture to high art, and the liberal humanist idea of the subject as individual, universal and rational. The politics and aesthetics that emerged from these ruptures in modernism and humanism were not altogether new. Since the pre-Revolutionary romanticism of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, artists and philosophers had proposed aesthetics and politics based on irrational principles or rational/irrational hybrids. Modernism itself had maintained a tension between its rational surface and its irrational underbelly. The new politics and aesthetics did not reject the high and the rational, but unravelled the power-laden hierarchy that had kept high and low, rational and irrational, separate. They therefore became known by the ambiguous terms postmodernism and posthumanism, along with numerous other ‘posts’, that signified both continuity and discontinuity, compliance and resistance.

Since its emergence in the 1830s, the cancan’s embodiment of the irrational, and of the mechanical other as a rational/irrational hybrid, had threatened to expose the hierarchy of rationality as a construction that benefited those at the top of the scale. As the Enlightenment model was revealed to be a framework of power, the

cancan's grotesque, hybridised body politics moved from the murky margins of Euro-American culture towards the centre. The breakdown of boundaries between bodily insides and outsides, between past and present, between human and machine, that the cancan represented, became culturally and aesthetically dominant.

However, this did not mean that the dance became unproblematic. Firstly, despite its subversive undercurrent, as a performance born within the ideological framework of evolutionism, the cancan is inscribed with the very body politics that it also resists, such as the nineteenth-century separation of male spectator from female spectacle, and the twentieth-century mechanisation of the body as a vehicle for mass politics or mass production. This made the dance problematic within the feminist and anti-fascist politics of the early movements against modernism and humanism. Hence, after the release of Can-Can in 1960, the dance disappeared from the screen for several years. Secondly, to the extent that modernism and humanism are not abolished by postmodernism and posthumanism, but are incorporated within them, postmodern culture remains at least partially resistant to the irrational body politics of the cancan.

In this chapter, the cancan's complex relationship to postmodern and posthuman aesthetics and politics is read through the film Moulin Rouge! (2001) directed by Baz Luhrmann and choreographed by John O'Connell. In this film, the nineteenth-century cancan is depicted using twenty-first century technologies and aesthetics. The latter trace their history through technologies such as the glass lens, photography and early cinema, which made the cancan image both more



and less rational. However, they also operate outside the evolutionist framework within which these earlier technologies developed. They therefore transform irrational *fin-de-siècle* cancan bodies into posthuman cancan bodies, inviting a form of spectatorship that depends not on the rational/irrational dichotomy, but is similarly posthuman. However, critical discourse on the film raises some of the problems summarised above. Analysis of this discourse provides a means of teasing out the tensions in posthuman body politics, tensions that continue to be negotiated through the cancan.

## **6.2: Reinventing the Film Musical**

Luhrmann claims to “reinvent the post-modern musical” (Luhrmann cited in Andrew, 2001 [online]) in Moulin Rouge!. He therefore positions the film in relation both to film musical history, and to the history of twentieth- and twenty-first-century culture. This section, similarly, locates Moulin Rouge! in relation to developments in late twentieth-century film musicals, and the historical and cultural shifts that catalysed them. It is argued that although Moulin Rouge! emerged out of the crisis in the film musical genre from the 1950s onwards, it responded to this crisis differently than did previous film musicals of the post-studio era. Instead, it reinvented the film musical by returning to an earlier aesthetic: the cinema of attractions.

Jane Feuer (1993) has identified a shift in the aesthetic of film musicals, starting in the 1950s, towards a self-reflexive questioning of musical conventions. She argues that, “[w]hen musicals do deconstruct, they tend to invert or negate

previous generic hierarchies of values” (Feuer, 1993, 107). From the 1950s onwards, the negation of film musical hierarchies paralleled the postmodern negation of social hierarchies, particularly that between the rational and the irrational. Previously, the tensions inherent in the social evolutionary paradigm between liberation through rationality and liberation through irrationality, had animated the film musical relationship between the linear, causal, rational narrative and the spontaneous, subversive, irrational musical number. As this paradigm broke down, however, the dynamic of the film musical was called into question.

Initially, film musicals responded to the incipient postmodern shifts in social values by attacking their own premises. Feuer (1993, 112) uses the example of Cabaret (1972), directed and choreographed by Bob Fosse, which begins with the distorted reflection of a cabaret audience in a mirror, and ends with the same reflection in which the Nazi swastika is now visible. As Feuer points out, the mirror ambiguously reflects and implicates both the internal cabaret audience and the external film audience. The masses who were seduced by the Berlin cabaret scene of the 1930s, the film implies, were the same masses who were seduced by National Socialist propaganda, and the same masses who were captivated by the Hollywood musical. The cancan is used to reinforce this message. Near the end of the film, the cabaret dancers perform a German ‘goosestep’ instead of a cancan, the unison leg lifts evoking the regimented version of the dance popular in the 1920s and 1930s. The mass hypnosis induced by the cancan, and the effects of the Nuremberg Rallies, are conflated. And at the very end of the film, Sally’s (Liza Minnelli) nightmarish fantasy about the sexually complex

relationships surrounding her pregnancy, is followed first by a brief glimpse of a wild cancan performed by heavily made-up dancers, and then the revelation that Sally has had an abortion. The monstrous results of the promiscuous atmosphere of the cabaret, embodied in the cancan, lead Sally to choose surgical procedures that pre-empt the sterilisation methods later used in the National Socialist eugenics programme. In Cabaret, the ideological separation between the politics of the narrative and the politically innocent musical number was questioned, paralleling the postmodern reinterpretation of modernism in which the latter's "transhistorical assertions of value were no longer seen as based – as claimed – on reason or logic, but rather on a solid alliance with power" (Hutcheon, 1988, 26).

However, Feuer contends that films such as Cabaret are not yet postmodern; rather, "self-reflexive musicals are 'modernist' in that they systematically deconstruct those very elements that give the genre its regularity" (Feuer, 1993, 126). She contrasts these films with the later development of the teen musical, a genre that includes films such as Flashdance (1983) and Dirty Dancing (1987), and to which she does ascribe postmodernism. The teen musical, she argues, is 'reconstructive' rather than 'deconstructive', introducing new elements to the genre, such as non-diegetic music, while referring back to previous conventions, not as self-reflexive parody, but as pastiche<sup>1</sup>. Indeed theorists who have focused on the dance content of these films, such as Larry Billman (1997) and Rachel Levin (2001 [online]), describe the relationship between dance and power that they portray in terms that contrast with the collusion depicted in Cabaret. Billman argues that in such films dance signifies liberation, and Levin observes

that in teen musicals from Saturday Night Fever (1977) to Save the Last Dance (2001), “dance is aligned with powerful resistance to social and ideological structures that oppress the individual” (Levin, 2001, 3 [online]). The teen musicals therefore reversed the conspiratorial dance/power relationship depicted in ‘anti-musicals’ like Cabaret<sup>2</sup>.

The anti-musicals and the teen musicals therefore manifested opposing reactions to the postmodern critique of the social evolutionary hierarchy as a narrative for legitimising power. The anti-musicals interrogated the political investments of their own genre, while the teen musicals rehabilitated musical conventions as a means of liberation from power structures. Both of these techniques would be incorporated into filmmaking in postmodernity, but both also remain tied in certain respects to modernist rhetoric. The anti-musicals adopted a position outside of the genre, deconstructing it completely, leaving no space for it to continue to exist; whereas the teen musicals revived the genre but did not critique it. Both of these sub-genres are therefore “coded singly” (Jencks, 1996, 46), that is, they exhibit a straightforward relationship to modernism and its products (such as the film musical): they either reject it or they reproduce it. Charles Jencks argues that single coding is characteristic not of postmodern artworks, but ‘Late-Modernism’. Rather, postmodern culture is characterised by the “double coding” (1996, 29) suggested in Linda Hutcheon’s claim that postmodernism “can both self-consciously incorporate and equally self-consciously challenge that modernism from which it derives and to which it owes its verbal existence” (Hutcheon, 1988, 52). This conception of the postmodern is evident in a critique

of the teen musical Dirty Dancing by Luhrmann, the director of Moulin Rouge! (2001):

The problem was – this is not to denigrate Dirty Dancing – but it had become just a naturalistic film and had lost the metaphor – the double meaning.

Luhrmann cited in Redwine, no date [online]

As Feuer (1993, 130) points out, teen musicals such as Dirty Dancing appear naturalistic because the use of non-diegetic music over the action, rather than musical numbers that arise out of or cut into the story, allows narrative absorption to be maintained.

In his “‘Red Curtain’ trilogy” (anon., 2001a [online]) (Strictly Ballroom [1992], Romeo + Juliet [1996], and Moulin Rouge! [2001]) Luhrmann sought to reinvent the film musical by returning to the double coding that had previously characterised the genre and that was now central to postmodern aesthetics. This double coding had been present in the narrative/attraction format of earlier film musicals, which continually shifted the spectator between naturalism, in which s/he could be absorbed while maintaining rational detachment, and artifice, which ruptured absorption and demanded a more embodied spectatorship.

Luhrmann aimed to cultivate this combination of narrative and artifice:

I realized at a relatively early age that the movie musical, perhaps more than any other genre, demands immediately that the viewer acknowledge he’s watching pure cinema, and not some simulation of real life. It’s all artifice, you see, and doesn’t really pretend to be otherwise. As a viewer you’re made aware from the beginning that you’re watching something patently unreal.... Strictly Ballroom was the first step of the ten-year journey I took in reinventing the movie musical, a process I believe culminated with Moulin Rouge!

Luhrmann cited in anon., 2002b [online]

Luhrmann attempts to secure this acknowledgement of artifice through the notion of a contract with the audience:

it's really important from the very beginning of the film to signal to the audience that they're entering into a contract with the storytelling, and I guess this was behind the passion we had to make sure that right from the Fox logo the audience is aware that they are participating in this motion picture, that this is not about naturalism  
Luhrmann, 2002 [DVD]

The audience is required to accept the conventions of the film musical, including what Luhrmann calls, "The Big Lie that reveals the Big Truth" (Luhrmann cited in anon., 2002b [online]), if they are to fully enter into the experience of the film. He challenges the spectator to sign up to this contract in the opening minutes of the film by using rapid, non-naturalistic editing:

We pushed that editing of the first fifteen minutes so that it was like – the naturalistic version of *Moulin Rouge* [1952] is wide shot, music, *Moulin Rouge*. In this film it's like, "POW, wake up, participate!" It's like you're confronted. It's like you're being asked will you give in, or will you go?  
Luhrmann cited in Murray, no date [online]

Luhrmann calls this "audience participatory cinema" (Luhrmann cited in anon., no date-a [online]), a model he claims was inspired by watching a Bollywood film in India (Luhrmann cited in Murray, no date [online]). However, this seduction of the spectator into physical involvement in the action was also present not only in the musical numbers of Hollywood films, but in the earlier cinema of attractions.

### 6.3: The Return of the Cinema of Attractions?

In ‘The Making of Moulin Rouge!’ featurette, a bonus feature on the Moulin Rouge! DVD, the sound of a coin dropping into a machine (presumably a nickelodeon), is followed by the frames of an early cancan film cranking up to speed, and then a montage of such films, before the Moulin Rouge cancan is replaced by the Moulin Rouge! cancan. The continuity between these cancan images, separated by a century, is emphasised by the continuity of the soundtrack – a music-hall-style tune about the ‘Diamond Dogs’ (the cancan dancers of the Moulin Rouge) – and Luhrmann’s commentary: “The greatest rave that ever there was. The first rave.... The nightclub of your dreams was Moulin Rouge”. And yet the movement from Moulin Rouge to Moulin Rouge! also highlights various technological differences: black and white images give way to colour, analogue sound gives way to digital sound, and celluloid gives way to digital technology. In this section, the complex relationship between Moulin Rouge! and the early cinema of attractions is explored. It is argued that Moulin Rouge! portrays the entertainment context out of which the cinema of attractions emerged, a context in which the humanist conventions of bourgeois society were subverted, but from a position beyond the breakdown of these conventions, in the posthumanist world.

Several film theorists (for example, Hansen, 1995 ; Jay, 2000) have noted the re-emergence, since around 1960, of a cinematic aesthetic that provokes an embodied reaction in the spectator, similar to the cinema of attractions described by Tom Gunning (1990). Linda Williams (1998) argues that the film that

inaugurated this return was Alfred Hitchcock's Psycho (1960). The embodied reaction that Psycho provoked was one of horror and shock, whereas Moulin Rouge!, as a tragic comedy, aims to elicit feelings of both exultation and grief, laughter and tears. Both films require that the audience subscribe to the rules of a cinematic game in order to feel the full impact of their effects. Echoing Luhrmann's notion of a contract, Williams posits that in Psycho, "we see a new bargain struck between filmmaker and audience" (1998, 108) in which the film's thrills can only be fully experienced if spectators discipline themselves to arrive at the cinema on time, and keep the plot twists a secret. According to Williams, Psycho's attractions include not only the shock of the early murder of a central character, but also the "transgressive sexualized thrill of promiscuous abandonment to indeterminate 'other' identities" (1998, 103). She notes that these attractions differ from those of the original cinema of attractions because the latter functioned within a stable framework of gender and sexuality that, by 1960, had already begun to collapse.

Moulin Rouge! follows Psycho in constructing a cinema of attractions that operates outside the fixed, hierarchical identities of social evolutionism and humanism. However, in this case, the spectator's position outside of this framework is emphasised by setting the film in the French *fin de siècle*, a time and place in which social evolutionary identities still governed everyday social and political life. The action takes place in and around the Moulin Rouge, a venue whose attraction rested on its ability to subvert and provide an escape from the bourgeois conventions that governed life outside the cabaret. Within the Moulin Rouge, gender, sexuality, race and class become temporarily fluid



categories. Satine (Nicole Kidman), a courtesan, seeks the higher status of a ‘real actress’, while Christian (Ewan McGregor), a young writer, seeks an escape from his middle-class upbringing in the bohemian culture of Montmartre. They meet at the Moulin Rouge where a multitude of alternative bodies are on display: clowns, a midget, cross-dressers, Siamese twins, black bodies, brown bodies, overweight bodies and tattooed bodies. Both Christian and Satine become involved in the production of a bohemian play called ‘Spectacular Spectacular!’, in which the story and characters of Moulin Rouge! are transposed onto an Indian setting, highlighting the performative status of all identities, on and off stage, at the Moulin Rouge. The characters initially appear liberated by the alternative personas on offer at the cabaret, but it quickly becomes clear that the narrative they must perform, in the film and the play within the film, has a foregone conclusion – the enslavement and death of Satine and the loss of Christian’s innocence. The reality of power, politics and hierarchy from which the Moulin Rouge appeared to be an escape, eventually closes in on them.

The original cinema of attractions emerged out of the entertainment context depicted in Moulin Rouge! (see section 3.8), and was animated by the same momentary rupture of normative, rational hierarchical relationships, such as the spectator’s attraction to or identification with the working-class cancan dancer or exotic performer. The postmodern context in which Moulin Rouge! was made, traces its pre-history through the mass production of irrational boundary-crossings in the cinema of attractions. Luhrmann recognises this parallel between the *fin-de-siècle* and the *fin-de-millennium*:

[we] settl[ed] on 1900, because it was such a great reflection of where we are now. So clearly a time of technological change, of where the world was both moving forward and backwards, where people were pulling back into the 19<sup>th</sup> century or moving forwards into the 20<sup>th</sup>.

Luhrmann cited in anon., 2001b [online]

Early cinema, like the *fin-de-siècle* cancan, subversively challenged the Enlightenment progression from irrationality to rationality, before postmodernism questioned the rational/irrational distinction itself. For this reason, Anne Friedberg argues that early cinema was “proto-postmodern” (Friedberg, 1993, 6). Eschewing the notion of a rupture between the modern and the postmodern, she posits that cinema, from its emergence to the present day, has facilitated a ‘mobile, virtual gaze’, which allows the spectator to maintain his/her identity while being virtually transported into the world and bodies of those portrayed on the screen:

as a mobilised gaze becomes more and more virtual, the physical body becomes a more and more fluid site. In this “virtual mobility” the actual body – gender-bound, race-bound, ethnicity-bound – becomes a veritable depot for departure and return.

Friedberg, 1993, 110

It is this experience of other bodies that allows these films to provoke embodied reactions in their audiences. Only by allowing the film spectator to ‘become’ the nineteenth-century Moulin Rouge patron, or the psychotic killer’s victim (or indeed the psychotic killer himself), can the physical experience of attraction, horror or exultation be achieved. For Friedberg, the virtual mobility experienced by the turn-of-the-twentieth-century spectator of the cinema of attractions, and the turn-of-the-twenty-first-century spectator in a multiplex or using a VCR, differs only in degree.

However, the twentieth-century history of the cancan on screen suggests that the spectator cannot fully enjoy the virtual mobility that Friedberg describes until the roles of spectator and spectacle are detached from the hierarchies that once defined them. Despite the mediation provided by the original cinema of attractions, the spectator's virtual mobility still opened him/her to charges of pathology, degeneration and madness (see sections 3.8, 4.4 and 4.7). In the twenty-first century, however, virtual mobility no longer holds these connotations. This change has resulted from the erosion of the Enlightenment hierarchy of rationality, and of the social evolutionary framework that supported it, a process that began with Rousseau's challenge to Enlightenment doctrine, but only achieved acceptance and dominance in the second half of the twentieth century. The return of the cinema of attractions from 1960 onwards signalled the new freedom of the film spectator to participate in virtual embodiment of onscreen others without fear of degeneration.

Laura U. Marks (2000) has recognised this shift in her theory of intercultural cinema. She argues that in the postcolonial, transnational contexts of mass diasporic movement and displacement, filmmakers working between cultures have developed a "haptic visuality" (Marks, 2000, xi), an aesthetic that evokes memories of physical sensations that transport spectators back across cultural boundaries, to the locations where those sensations were first experienced. In this form of filmmaking, the classical conception of the cinema screen as a window, but also a protective barrier between the spectator and the cinematic world, disintegrates: "For intercultural artists it is most valuable to think of the skin of

the film not as a screen, but as a membrane that brings its audience into contact with the material forms of memory” (2000, 243). This tactile screen represents the reworking of the cinema of attractions for a postcolonial, transnational, postmodern, posthuman world.

Luhrmann, a postcolonial (Australian) director working for an American production company (Twentieth Century Fox) on a film inspired by Bollywood, set in Paris, and filmed in Australia, positions his work as both continuous with and different from previous manifestations of the cinema of attractions, such as early cancan films and film musicals:

What we’ve tried to do is take something very old and deal with it in a very not even *now* way, I wanted to make a cinematic language that would worked [sic] this side of what I call the ‘millennial gate.’ Something that works for this future that we are now becoming part of.

Luhrmann cited in Murray, no date [online]

As audience participatory cinema, Moulin Rouge! offers the spectator the opportunity to virtually embody both the rational and irrational identities of the *fin de siècle*, protected by digital mediation, and the disintegration of the hierarchy that once made this practice so dangerous. The original cinema of attractions was so subversive because this hierarchy made irrational embodiment and rational mediation contradictory, since they were situated at opposite ends of the social evolutionary scale. In the new cinema of attractions, however, embodiment and mediation are no longer hierarchically separated, no longer contradictory, and no longer a subversive combination. If the old cinema of attractions was premised on the humanist body, which could not be both rational

and irrational at the same time, then the new cinema of attractions demands a new type of spectatorial body that will be explored in the next section.

#### **6.4: The Posthuman Spectator**

Elsewhere I have argued that Moulin Rouge! offers spectators different types of gaze through which they can participate in the choreography that takes place between the camera, the bodies of the performers and the spectator (Parfitt, 2005)<sup>3</sup>. Here, however, access to these identities is instead conceived to take place via the *body* of the spectator, which is constructed specifically for this purpose. This new breed of viewer possesses neither the physically and mentally vulnerable body of the nineteenth-century cancan spectator, nor the fortified body of the classical cinema spectator, separated from the spectacle by the screen and the narrative. Rather, the body of the postmodern, posthuman spectator can be conceived as a multi-directional interface, or switchboard, through which he/she can ‘plug in’ to various identities, rational and irrational, offered by the media, via the prosthetic device of the remote control or computer mouse. This posthuman viewer therefore shares with the cancan spectator a body permeable to outside forces, but, like the spectator of narrative cinema, these forces remain mediated by technology. The body of this spectator may be imagined as a networking hub that allows control as well as connectivity, an embodiment that is not immediate but virtual. The physical response to mediated images that this facilitates is reminiscent of the cinema of attractions, but the attraction is no longer defined by the terms of the social evolutionary hierarchy. The embodied experience of horror, for example, no longer literally threatens the spectator’s

rationality, although it may impact on aspects of the spectator's identity that remain influenced by social evolutionary categories, such as masculinity.

Friedberg comes close to describing this kind of spectator when she writes, “[c]inematic and televisual spectatorship offered new freedoms over the body – the race-, gender-, age-, and class-bound body could be ‘implanted’ with a constructed (albeit ideological) virtual gaze” (Friedberg, 1993, 143). However, the model of spectatorship implied in Moulin Rouge! and outlined here bears more resemblance to contemporary theories of the posthuman or cyborg (cybernetic organism) body (for example, Deleuze and Guattari, 1984; 1988; Haraway, 1991; Hayles, 1999). In these theories the relationship between technology and the body takes the form not merely of an implant, but a thorough interpenetration of technological and material elements, such that the two are inextricable.

As Katherine Hayles points out, the posthuman does not necessarily imply a literal fusion of human and machine. Rather, the penetration of technology into the body can take place on the level of subjectivity, so that, “even a biologically unaltered *Homo Sapiens* counts as posthuman” (Hayles, 1999, 4). In this sense, the creation of a posthuman body is an effect of the historical and cultural construction of subjectivity. Indeed, Friedberg's ‘virtual, mobile gaze’ also functions on the level of subjectivity. Aspects of this construction include an increasing reliance on computer interaction, facilitated by the manual co-ordination of a mouse or tracker pad, in working and personal life; in particular, the importance of the internet for facilitating work, entertainment and

communication; increasingly interactive techno-entertainments such as DVD and Nintendo Wii; the popularity of personal communications and entertainment devices that interact with or attach to the body such as mobile phones, particularly hands-free models, PDAs (Personal Digital Assistants, or palmtop computers) and ipods; and the ubiquity of the screen in general as an interface for communication, work, entertainment and advertising, for example. This technophilic environment both constructs and is constructed by a subjective formation in which the rational boundaries of the individual, self-determining body are infiltrated by technology.

Johannes Birringer has discussed the effect of this environment on art and dance. He argues that the phenomenon of “younger dance artists growing up with computers, music television, techno, hip hop, and the transnational exchanges and cross-overs in music” (Birringer, 2004 [online]) has produced an emphasis on interactivity in art in general and dance in particular. By interactivity he means the “active, physical participation of the audience in the event” (2004 [online]), usually through mediating technologies, such as multimedia installations and sensory environments<sup>4</sup>. He posits that “[t]echnology has decisively challenged bodily boundaries and spatial realities, profoundly affecting the relations between humans and machines” (2004 [online]). Like the glass lens of photography and cinema, digital technologies both mediate the relationship between body and world and facilitate irrational flows between them. But for the posthuman spectator, who recognises no boundary between human and machine, this interaction is not problematic.

It is to this spectator that Luhrmann's contract appeals. For those willing to give up their rational expectations of narrative cinema, he offers entrance into a world in which the rational and irrational identities of the past are on offer for virtual embodiment. The term 'virtual' here implies a space in which physical interaction can be simulated by technology. Elaine Graham explains that, "[v]irtual reality allows the user to project a digitally generated self into cyberspace, synthesizing new spatial and temporal contexts within which alternative subjectivities are constructed" (Graham, 2002, 5). While Moulin Rouge! does not offer the immersive environment of virtual reality, its use of a digitalised cinema of attractions to invite the spectator to respond physically to the spectacle, can be conceived as opening a virtual space between spectator and image in which alternative bodies, identities and sensations can be 'tried on'. This is very different from the appeal of conventional narrative cinema, which diminishes after the ending is known. Rather, Moulin Rouge! is

like a favourite record that you put on because you want the feeling that the record gives you. We are not about revealing plot – you know how it is going to end – so this film is an experience which, if you connect with it, you can experience time and time again.

Luhrmann cited in Fawcett, 2002 [online]

This virtual interaction between image and spectator can be conceived as a virtual dance, defined by Richard Lord as, "a dance that does not exist in reality, does not involve a real dancer or a real space, but can nonetheless be experienced by an audience member" (Lord cited in Dixon, 2007, 230). The offer of this virtual, embodied experience in Moulin Rouge!, is exemplified in the cancan sequence. Rapid editing, a fast-moving camera, a driving soundtrack, and close-ups of dancing bodies are used to give the spectator the experience of being in



the Moulin Rouge. Although the narrative positions the spectator in the role of Christian on his first visit to the cabaret, the sequence can also be viewed separately from the narrative as an experience in itself, through which the spectator can embody a range of positions including those of the male spectators, cancan dancers, and other performers of alternative physicalities. Furthermore, these roles are not mutually exclusive; the proximity, fragmentation and speed of the bodies in the sequence gives the impression not of individuation, but of grotesque bodies that are open to sensation, pleasure, and other bodies. The experience of this type of physicality is available to the spectator, through his/her interaction with the digital images.

The notion of interaction, here, can be conceived even more literally in the case of the spectator who views Moulin Rouge! on DVD at home, rather than in the cinema. The spectator in the cinema can still be posthuman, but her/his capacity to interact and connect with the narrative is curtailed by the unbreakable flow of cinema viewing. Luhrmann was excited by the possibilities offered by digital film, and took a leading role in the production of the Moulin Rouge! DVD:

I felt when video first came along that it was a reduction of the experience of cinema. But my experience has been re-enlivened through DVD. It is technically great and gives us the ability to share the filmmaker's world. Which is why I am very involved in the DVD.

Luhrmann cited in Fawcett, 2002 [online]

The discussion in the following sections focuses on Moulin Rouge! viewed at home on DVD. Luhrmann compares the digital film spectator with the computer or games console user in an interview with a computer gaming website:

I do believe that storytelling and gaming will come closer and closer together. The idea of the audience being the actual protagonist is something we storytellers cannot ignore. Strangely, gaming is a window into that sort of storytelling.

Luhrmann cited in Frank, 2002 [online]

The possibility of using digital technology to facilitate interaction with, and even embodiment of, cinematic images, is explored in the Moulin Rouge! DVD 'bonus features'. The DVD includes a section in which the dance sequences can be viewed either in extended version, or in 'multi-cam' format, in which the spectator can choose, at any time during the sequence, between four different camera angles from which to view the movement. The spectator thus becomes an interactive participant in the mediated dance created by the intersection of choreography, camerawork and editing.

The posthuman spectator is defined by a subjectivity which is not individual and bounded, but open to interaction with other bodies, images and machines. Moulin Rouge! offers this spectator virtual embodiment of other identities portrayed on screen. As the next section will show, these identities draw on images not just of the *fin-de-siècle* Moulin Rouge, but from the twentieth-century history of cinema, music and popular culture. By virtually embodying these images, the posthuman spectator ruptures not only her/his own bodily boundaries, but the Enlightenment notion of history as a linear progression towards the rationalisation of humanity. For the posthuman spectator, virtual mobility no longer takes place along a social evolutionary scale, but through the non-hierarchical image repository of popular cultural history.

## 6.5: “Only Connect!”<sup>5</sup>

Many reviewers have noted the bewildering range of historical reference points in Moulin Rouge!. Joe Leydon, writing in the San Francisco Examiner, only touches the tip of the iceberg when he reports that, “the movie is a postmodern collage of opulent, grand operas, Old Hollywood musicals, cutting-edge musical videos and India’s bigger-than-life Bollywood extravaganzas” (Leydon, no date [online]). An attempt to detail these references is beyond the scope of this thesis (probably the most extensive list so far, compiled by Robert Morace (2003), runs to five pages but claims to be far from comprehensive). Rather, this section is concerned with the way in which this act of historical bricolage creates particular types of performing and spectating bodies. The chapter begins with an analysis of some of the historical and cultural reference points in the cancan sequence in Moulin Rouge! (section 6.3.1). This analysis highlights the complex politics involved in choreographing a cancan in postmodernity, and posits that the type of spectator ideally equipped to engage with this postmodern cancan is a posthuman one. This is followed by a theoretical discussion of the interaction between the posthuman spectator and the varied historical and cultural reference points in Moulin Rouge!, focussing on the critiques that have been levelled at the film’s intertextuality (sections 6.3.2 and 6.3.3).

### *6.5.1: How Do You Make a Posthuman Cancan?*

O’Connell confided in a telephone interview that “the cancan was quite tricky because if it looks too much like routine it looks like its not as wild as it could

have been, but if it's just a whole bunch of random wildness then it starts to lose interest as well" (O'Connell, 2005 [telephone interview]). By the turn of the twenty-first century, cancan choreography had been rendered "tricky" by its past associations both with the *fin-de-siècle* fascination with the irrational and with the rationalised aesthetics of fascism. A cancan for postmodernity needed to transcend the categories of irrational and rational, while drawing its meaning from these previous associations. A similar problem was broached by the philosopher Deleuze and his psychoanalyst collaborator Guattari (1988) in a chapter entitled, "How do you make yourself a body without organs?" (1988, 150). The body without organs is a way of producing flows and connections within and between bodies, and is similar to the posthuman body. They elaborate:

How can we fabricate a BwO [Body without Organs] for ourselves without its being the cancerous BwO of a fascist inside us, or the empty BwO of a drug addict, paranoid, or hypochondriac? How can we tell the three Bodies apart?

Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, 163

Deleuze and Guattari's search for a body without organs is reminiscent of O'Connell's cancan dilemma. In this section, the body without organs, and other theories of the posthuman body, are compared with the posthuman spectator constructed in Moulin Rouge!, particularly in the cancan sequence. The Moulin Rouge! cancan choreography simultaneously exhibits the grotesque bodies of the *fin-de-siècle quadrille naturaliste*, the multiplicity of dancers characteristic of the 1920s kickline, and choreography more reminiscent of the cancan films of the 1950s. This patchwork of references suggests not just postmodern historical scavenging, but an attempt to negotiate the diverse historical connotations of the

cancan from a viewpoint at the turn of the twenty-first century. The posthuman spectator is perfectly suited to this type of negotiation.

In the cancan sequence, layers of cultural and historical references are used in order to help the spectator locate themselves in the context of the Moulin Rouge.

Luhrmann explains:

we did come out of a historical reality, we just manipulated them [sic] to make some sort of code for us to understand – not what it was, but what it felt like to be there. That’s quite a distinction. What the can-can was – a violent, sexy dance. What it would look like was a lot of leaping around in funny costumes. What it felt like was Fatboy Slim, people doing break-dancing, very funky. It’s this kind of decoding, just helping the audience figure where they are in a given moment.

Luhrmann cited in anon., 2001b [online]

Through music, lighting, camerawork, and references to drug-taking, the cancan at the Moulin Rouge is constructed as a nineteenth-century precursor to the contemporary sub-cultures of dance music and rave<sup>6</sup>. Maria Pini (1997) has researched the latter, and argues that female ravers’ accounts of a sense loss of a gender-, race-, class-specific self and incorporation into a wider body while raving, parallel feminist and posthumanist challenges to the liberal humanist bounded body. This posthuman raving body specifically questions rationalist definitions of the self, and the distinction between rationality and irrationality itself; one raver claims, “[r]ave is about going to the edge, which represents the edge between sanity and insanity” (‘Elaine’ cited in Pini, 1997, 120).

Furthermore, the unbounded self constructed here is not distinct from technology, but a “particular mind/body/technology assemblage” (1997, 125) in which music, lighting and drugs merge into the experience of the body.

Similarly, the spectator who accepts Luhrmann's contract can enter into a virtual space between material body and digital film in which an embodied response to mediated images is possible. In this space the cancan can be experienced in terms of the liberatory sensations of unbounded physicality produced in a rave. The spectator may physically identify with the heterogeneous bodies portrayed on screen. The subversion of bourgeois, rationalist, humanist norms that the cancan produced in the *fin-de-siècle*, is evoked through the posthuman body of contemporary rave culture.

As Luhrmann states, the cancan sequence also makes reference to contemporary hip-hop culture, particularly in the section entitled 'Zidler's Rap', in which the Moulin Rouge manager, Harold Zidler, addresses the camera directly, flanked by female cancan dancers, in the style of a hip-hop music video<sup>7</sup>. Like rave culture, hip-hop culture also connotes the posthuman. Alexander G. Weheliye argues that in the history of black American popular music, "[f]rom nineteenth-century spirituals through the blues, jazz, soul, hip hop, and techno, the human and the posthuman are in constant dynamic tension" (Weheliye, 2002, 30). In these genres, an aspiration for inclusion in the category 'human', defined in Western discourse by the exclusion of black subjectivity, struggles against an impulse to redefine humanness "by embracing new technologies, hybridities, and self-consciousness" (2002, 30). This ambivalence is exemplified in the various forms of hip-hop dance, sometimes claimed to be an 'authentic' expression of African-American-ness (humanist rhetoric), while cultivating forms of movement in which the human body is infiltrated by technology, such as popping, locking, ticking and electric boogaloo (Jackson, 2001, 41; McCarren, 2003, 193-94). The

nineteenth-century cancan, often described in racial, social evolutionary terms as ‘savage’ (see section 2.12), and technologised as a dancing machine (see section 2.4), represented a similar performative challenge to Enlightenment definitions of humanity. The allusions to hip-hop in the cancan sequence position the dance in relation to other performances of posthumanist resistance, while inviting the spectator to fuse her/his own body with the digital machine.

The techno-bodies created in both rave culture and hip-hop function as ‘mechanical others’ (see section 3.3), human-like runaway machines that provoke both terror and desire. For example, one of the female ravers explained,

[y]ou just *can't* stop sometimes. It's like you're being pushed to dance.... Everyone around me looked like they were chopped-up by the strobes. I mean, I could see heads here, arms there, all flashing up at different moments and it was actually a bit freaky.... You feel like you are a robot.

'Catherine' cited in Pini, 1997, 126

Nineteenth-century cancan dancers were described in similar fragmented, uncontrollable, mechanical terms (see section 3.4). Their attraction and danger lay in the possibility of this irrational compulsion infecting the spectator. The Moulin Rouge! cancan dancers refer to all of these historically and culturally disparate human/mechanical bodies simultaneously. Furthermore, their multiplicity and choreographed movements evoke the cinematic versions of the dance produced in the 1950s, of which O'Connell particularly admired French Cancan (1955) (O'Connell, 2005 [telephone interview]).

As Pini points out, the machine-human hybrid was theorised in the late twentieth century by Deleuze and Guattari (1984; 1988). In A Thousand Plateaus (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988) they argue that a healthy ‘body without organs’, interpreted here as a posthuman body, accepts its integration into a mechanical or virtual world by becoming a ‘desiring-machine’ for the production of flows and connections within and between bodies. The successful body without organs is a “little machine, ready to be plugged into other collective machines” (1988, 161), and therefore no longer an individual self. They contrast this with the unhealthy body without organs described in Anti-Oedipus (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984) which resists the flows and connections of desiring-machines and “presents its smooth, slippery, opaque taut surface as a barrier” (1984, 9). Desiring-machines, or mechanical others, become an object of simultaneous attraction and repulsion for these bounded bodies that Sigmund Freud categorised as repressed.

The Moulin Rouge! cancan dancers, whose multiplicity and choreographed movements evoke the cinematisation of the dance throughout the twentieth century, function as desiring-machines, their technological mediation, through camerawork and editing, multiplying their attraction. However, as Deleuze and Guattari (1988) point out, the body without organs must “keep an eye out for all that is fascist, even inside us” (1988, 165). O’Connell, similarly, avoids in his choreography the aesthetic of the precision kickline, associated with mass culture and its fascist abuses: “The cancan is such a known dance that I don’t approach it from the idea of doing steps.... It kind of has the dynamic of a big impact of twenty-five dancers going fast and full-out, but I tried to make it a bit looser in the sense that it wasn’t a structured cancan” (O’Connell interviewed in



Luhrmann, 2002 [DVD]). Indeed, the association of the cancan with conformism and even totalitarianism may have contributed to the absence of the dance from the screen from 1960 until 1972, when it returned in Cabaret, but as part of a critique of fascism. It did not return until Moulin Rouge! in 2001. O'Connell's choreography emphasises individual dance styles over unison, and includes sections in which the dancers break out of their mass formations and interact with the Moulin Rouge spectators in a way that appears only loosely choreographed. This loosening of the physical regimentation that the mediation of the cancan had produced in the twentieth century, forestalls the suspicion of spectator manipulation that had accompanied these cinematic choreographies.

Deleuze and Guattari's catalogue of posthuman bodies is also useful in analysing the Moulin Rouge! spectator. The healthy body without organs, described by Deleuze and Guattari as "full of gaiety, ecstasy and dance" (1988, 150), is also a good model for the type of film spectator constructed by the film. By entering into Luhrmann's contract, this spectator becomes integrated into a virtual world in which physical sensations generated by the desiring-machines on screen can pass through the technological medium of digital cinema into his/her body. This ideal Moulin Rouge! spectator might be contrasted with the bourgeois, *fin-de-siècle*, male cancan spectator, who can be read as an unhealthy body without organs, presenting the outline of his individual body as a barrier to the dancer's seductions, while desiring to break this boundary.

While O'Connell may not have been aware of the connotations of the past cancan styles that he rejected, his struggle to avoid both wild and structured

aesthetics suggests an attempt to position his choreography within a complex field of body politics that stretches across space and time. The posthuman spectator can choose to plug into these reference points, creating flows of meaning across historical and cultural boundaries. This process of making connections between disparate images and texts is addressed in the next two sub-sections.

#### *6.5.2: Intertextuality in Moulin Rouge!: The End of History?*

The plethora of references made by Moulin Rouge! to images and identities with which the posthuman spectator can connect, have been analysed in terms of the postmodern theory of intertextuality, that is, reference to a range of other ‘texts’ within the text of the film (for example, Morace, 2003). This technique was received with both praise and scorn by the critics. José Arroyo complained in Sight and Sound that, “[t]his Moulin is textbook postmodernism at its worst, a relentless pastiche of pop-cultural sounds and representations sutured into the service of a cliché” (Arroyo, 2001, 50). Julia Kristeva (1986) argues that intertextuality arose out of the carnivalesque language developed as an alternative to official culture in Europe from the seventeenth century onwards, described by Mikhail Bakhtin (1984). Arroyo’s dismissal of Moulin Rouge!’s intertextuality as artless popular culture, reproduces the high cultural repression of the low carnivalesque. Kristeva notes that the carnivalesque “remains present as an often misunderstood and persecuted substratum of official Western culture throughout its entire history” (Kristeva, 1986, 48). This sub-section and the next address two criticisms of made of intertextuality in general, and in Moulin

Rouge! in particular. The first is that the intertextuality in Moulin Rouge! erases history. The second is that Moulin Rouge! both assaults the viewer with intertextual references while distancing the audience from the emotion of the story. It is argued, however, that these criticisms arise from a humanist approach to the film and to intertextuality. By approaching the film as posthuman spectator, some of the difficulties of historical disjuncture and physical assault/detachment can be resolved.

Lael Ewy (no date [online]) opens his critique of Moulin Rouge! with the following defence of history:

At best Moulin Rouge is a lot of fun. At worst it represents the erasure of history. Moulin Rouge is set in the Paris of 1900 - at least ostensibly it is. The actual Paris of 1900 is the Paris of Satie, the Paris of Ravel, of Debussy. The actual Paris of 1900 is the Paris of Matisse, and at least for part of the year, the Paris of Picasso.... What we get in Moulin Rouge, though, is a Paris of 1900 filtered through the myopia of late 20<sup>th</sup> Century pop culture, especially pop music. We get an anachronistic melange of Madonna and Elton John, of Nirvana and Olivia Newton John. In other words, it isn't the Paris of 1900. It isn't even close.

Ewy, no date [online]

Ewy echoes the lament of many detractors of postmodernism that contemporary culture signals the “end of history” (Jameson, 1998, 73). The linear flow of history as a narrative that gives meaning to events and people within it, is disrupted by a postmodern culture that appropriates images irrespective of chronology. Critics argue that the ‘depth’ of history is replaced by surface images, which can be ‘stolen’ from the past, and harnessed for commercial or political purposes. Regarding Moulin Rouge!, New York Times critic Elvis Mitchell complains that,

In telling the story, Mr. Luhrmann pilfers music and movies like a fearless home invader; he kicks the door down and takes what he wants right off the table. The movie vaults from ‘La Bohème’ to ‘La Traviata’ to ‘Camille’ to ‘Cabaret’.

Mitchell, 2001 [online]

For Mitchell, this fragmentation of history causes a loss of meaning. He argues that the lyrics Luhrmann ‘steals’ “are given air in those original songs. Hijacked from their moorings, they float aimlessly” (Mitchell, 2001 [online]). Ewy implies an even more serious consequence, the loss of truth:

What’s lost here is history. History tells us what is here, what it means, how it got here, and hints as to what should be done with it. With every cycling of culture, a little meaning is lost, the sense of the song falls away, the context of the book is forgotten, the footnotes removed. With each transvaluation of culture, which is what Daimler Chrysler has done in its ad, what Disney has done, what *Moulin Rouge* does, history is erased, meaning turns in on itself is repolarized and destroyed. It is worse than the old Soviet practice of writing the unfavored out of the history books

Ewy, no date [online]

Ewy’s conception of history derives from the humanist tradition of the Enlightenment. In this model the past objectively exists, and therefore accounts of the past either reveal its essence truthfully, or obscure it. Furthermore, in this account, history is linear – one cannot go back and change things. However, as Fredric Jameson (1991) points out, postmodern theory posits a different notion of history,

that period concepts finally correspond to no realities whatsoever, and that... the collective reality of the multitudinous lives encompassed by such terms is nontotalizable (or nontotalizable, to use a current expression) and can never be described, characterised,

labelled, or conceptualized.... In that case, of course, there is no such thing as “history”

Jameson, 1991, 282

From a humanist perspective, this is a troubling notion. However, Jacques Derrida (1994) frames the problem differently. He “wonder[s] if the end of history is but the end of a *certain* concept of history” (Derrida, 1994, 15, original emphasis). If the end of history is in fact the end of the Enlightenment notion of history as a linear progression, then there might be good reasons for this curtailment. As this thesis has shown, Enlightenment historiography has frequently been used over the last two hundred years to justify the disempowerment of certain bodies, based on their supposed irrationality and therefore primitivity, and the empowerment of other bodies, constructed as rational, on the basis that rationality is mankind’s historical destiny.

Since the Enlightenment, this model has been challenged, notably by Walter Benjamin’s reconceptualisation of the historian’s subject matter as “the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one” (Benjamin, 1973a, 255) (see section 4.7). It is this conception of history, as a set of moving prisms through which images of the past are refracted in ever changing ways, that is employed in intertextuality. According to this view, bodies are no longer defined by their position on a timescale from irrationality to rationality. In posthuman bodies, the rational and the irrational, the technological and the material, are non-hierarchical and inextricable. Following the aesthetic of appropriation cultivated in 1950s filmmaking (see chapter 5), they confuse linear histories by plugging into images without respect for chronology. Similarly, Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston (1995) argue that,

[p]osthuman bodies do not belong to linear history. They are of the past and future lived as a present crisis. This present does not glide smoothly along a one-dimensional timeline but erupts or coalesces non-locally across an only partially temporizable realm of meaning.  
Halberstam and Livingston, 1995, 4

Viewed from a posthuman perspective, the end of history is not troubling, but opens up the possibility of making new connections across time. For the posthuman spectator, the intertextuality in Moulin Rouge! does indeed erase a certain conception of history, but replaces it with one that has radical potential for rethinking the relations between time and the body.

#### 6.5.3: Digitextuality in Moulin Rouge!: Embodiment and Detachment

The role of the body in this new conception of history is much more visible in Moulin Rouge! than in Kristeva's version of intertextuality. Kristeva's intertextuality operates between three "dimensions or coordinates... [the] writing subject, addressee and exterior texts" (Kristeva, 1986, 36). She qualifies this by noting that, "[t]he addressee, however, is included within a book's discursive universe only as discourse itself... He thus fuses with this other discourse, this other book, in relation to which the writer has written his own text" (1986, 37). The reader therefore becomes text in order to coalesce with another text embedded in the book s/he is reading. Kristeva recognises this mediation of the body, stating that "[t]he notion of intertextuality replaces that of intersubjectivity" (1986, 37), that is, the immediate relationship between reader and writer is replaced by one mediated by a web of connected texts. This loss of the material body in the act of merging reader with text is reminiscent of that

observed by Hayles (1999) in her analysis of the fusion of human and machine in the posthuman body of cybernetics. She argues that the cybernetic construction of the posthuman has persistently erased embodiment, conceiving of the body not as a material form, but as a mass of informational patterns. As with Kristeva's intertextuality, the body is dispersed into a rational, non-material form in order to be conjoined with its non-human other. By constructing the body as already mechanical, human and machine can be merged, for example by downloading consciousness onto a computer, without addressing the central problem of what happens to the body. This type of cyborg, Hayles notes, has more in common with rational humanism, in which the materiality of the body is denied, than posthumanism. Hayles contends that only by re-embodiment the posthuman, and recognising the hybridity that occurs at the human/machine interface, can the liberal humanist subject, and the hierarchies of power that accompany it, be deconstructed.

Like much contemporary digital performance, in which the virtual is explored not to the exclusion of the physical, but in interaction with it (Dixon, 2007, 215-16), Moulin Rouge! re-embodies the intertextual network that Kristeva envisaged. The example of the cancan in the previous sub-section showed how historical and cinematic references are made via the bodies of the actors.

Luhrmann explains further with reference to Satine:

we said, 'Well look, Satine is a courtesan. She sells her love to men.' .... If she was dressed as a courtesan necked [sic] to knee, you wouldn't understand it. She looks a little bit like Marlene Dietrich in Blue Angel. A little bit like Madonna. So we're saying, we're using culture we understand and cultural references we understand to enter into the world of the characters and place.

Luhrmann cited in anon., no date-b [online]

Intertextual images are presented to the spectator not just as texts through which the film can be read, but as bodies through which the film can be virtually ‘felt’. In this way, Luhrmann sought to “access a direct emotional response” (Luhrmann cited in Andrew, 2001 [online]). This intention is also present in O’Connell’s choreographic process. Referring specifically to the tango sequence, but also to the intertextual references in the choreography of the film in general, he explains:

Basically when you’re in the rehearsal room it’s a spontaneous kind of organic thing that happens, so maybe subliminally all those classes you had and all those films you saw that had tango in are in the back of your head, but it would be impossible I think to work, for me, to work where you say “oh that’s a great shot, I should put that somewhere”. I tried to capture the flavour of something, like the excitement of “let’s put on a show!” and the silliness of it.

O’Connell, 2005 [telephone interview]

O’Connell incorporates past films and experiences into his choreography ‘organically’, in order to convey a sensory experience, a taste, a feeling, rather than a text that the spectator must assimilate into her/his reading of the film.

The embodied form of intertextuality that Moulin Rouge! employs elicited some strangely physical reactions from the critics. Arroyo was “walloped by talent and frazzled by cleverness” (Arroyo, 2001, 50); Peter Travers, writing for Rolling Stone, “felt mauled” (Travers, no date [online]); and The Observer’s Philip French was “targeted by a squadron of kamikaze bombers loaded with sugary marshmallow” (French, 2001 [online]). For these spectators Moulin Rouge!’s offer of virtual embodiment was an attack on their rational individuated selves.



However, the same reviewers also commented that intertextual references also generated a sense of emotional distance from the film. Arroyo argues that, “Moulin Rouge... merely represents feeling in fragments and through quotations, keeping it at a comfortable remove from the audience” (Arroyo, 2001, 52), while Travers asks, “[d]oes Luhrmann think that hammering us with power-ballad clichés (“The greatest thing you’ll ever learn/Is just to love/And be loved in return”) will make us feel the emotions that once grounded them?” (Travers, no date [online]).

Laura Mulvey (2006) has explored this capacity of digital cinema to generate both connection and detachment. She argues that digital cinema, viewed at home through DVD technology, is characterised by the capacity to act as a “‘conduit’... that then flows into multiple possible channels from personal memory to textual analysis to historical research, opening up the past for a specifically cinematic excavation” (2006, 26). These conduits are formed through the spectator’s ability to freeze, skip and repeat images instantaneously and with single-frame accuracy, as well as through interaction with the bonus features that operate outside of the primary narrative. The digital film opens itself up for spectatorial dissection in a way that celluloid and video did not. Mulvey adopts Anna Everett’s neologism “digitextuality” (2006, 29-30), to describe this new mode of intertextuality made possible by digital cinema.

However, Mulvey points out that this formation of connections through the disruption of narrative flow also dislocates the spectator from the time and place of the narrative, and raises their awareness of the processes of making and

viewing the film. Indeed, Luhrmann strives to ensure that the audience remain conscious of the artifice of the cinematic spectacle (see section 6.2). Mulvey observes that whereas narrative cinema had obscured the tension between the apparent physical immediacy of cinematic images and knowledge of their technological construction, digital film allows this tension to rise to the surface again. For example, in the ‘Your Song’ sequence in Moulin Rouge!, the sense of exultation evoked by the references to the dancing of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, Gene Kelly’s Singin’ in the Rain (1952), and Georges Méliès’ iconic moon from Le Voyage Dans La Lune (1902), is held in tension with awareness of the obviously digitalised images.

For Mulvey, this tension generates the uncanny sensation that the early cinema of attractions provoked. Here, she draws both on Ernst Jentsch’s (1996) technological definition of the uncanny as that which appears both animate and inanimate, and Freud’s (1990) description of it as the regression of the rational mind to primitive irrationality. Digital spectatorship, she implies, produces the uncanny sensation of being both rationally outside of and in control of the film, and irrationally in thrall to its images. For the humanist body, this paradox is indeed uncomfortable: the bounded body cannot be both open and closed, subjectively inside and objectively outside the image, at the same time. For the posthuman body, as defined by Hayles, however, there is no contradiction between sensation and mediation. The posthuman is both body and machine, and ‘plugging in’ to the mediated image can in fact allow physical sensation to flow. Digital cinema, therefore, does not appear uncanny to the posthuman spectator.

By inviting the spectator to become posthuman, Moulin Rouge! offers a digitextuality that is not uncanny as Mulvey describes. For example, the posthuman spectator may embody the experience of being in the Moulin Rouge by connecting it with the experience of a rave, while also remaining fully aware that this image is mediated, using the DVD chapters to return to the sequence out of narrative order, freezing it at key moments, and using the bonus features to explore the sequence in more detail. For the posthuman spectator these two positions, inside and outside the image, are not contradictory. Virtual embodiment allows identity play that is both physical and mediated, open to bodily fusions, but insulated from the social evolutionary implications of these identities.

It is this capacity to construct a posthuman spectator that separates the digital cinema of Moulin Rouge! from film and video media. Russell (1999) describes video technology as haunted by the uncanny ghost of celluloid film, in the same way that Walter Benjamin (1973b) described film as haunted by the aura of liveness. Donna Haraway (1991), in her 'Cyborg Manifesto', affirms that "[p]re-cybernetic machines could be haunted; there was always the spectre of the ghost in the machine" (1991, 152). These ghosts manifest the uncanny sensation of being unable to reconcile the rational knowledge of technological mediation with an irrational feeling of physical connection. The latter is often associated with previous, supposedly less mediated forms of technology, which appear to haunt new media. This spectre was present in the cinema of attractions (see section 3.8), in 1920s cancan films such as The Phantom of the Moulin Rouge (1925), in which the rationalised movements of the precision kick-line conjured the ghost

of a repressed past (see section 4.5), and also in the 1950s appropriations of cancan imagery, such as the deathbed scene in Moulin Rouge (1952), in which the ghosts of cancan dancers return to say goodbye to Toulouse-Lautrec (see section 5.4.3). The reproduction of or reference to celluloid film or pre-cinematic live entertainment on video can invite a mode of spectatorship based on nostalgia for less mediated times that Jameson (1991) has identified with postmodern filmmaking. However, as Friedberg points out in her critique of Jameson, “[n]ostalgia can hide the discontinuities between the present and the past” (Friedberg, 1993, 188), allowing an immersion in images of the past that evades the awareness of mediation that Mulvey identifies in digital cinema and on which Luhrmann insists.

Haraway argues that the cyborg is not haunted by the ghost of a less mediated past to which it wishes to return as an escape from machines, because “[t]he machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment” (Haraway, 1991, 180). The spectator, conceived as a posthuman or cyborg, can plug into the past identities reconstructed on the screen, while maintaining mediated distance from them. Luhrmann’s film, therefore, implies a shift from the Freudian model employed by Mulvey, in which rationality and irrationality, machine and body, remain distinguishable and hierarchically placed along a humanist historical timeline, to the post-Freudian world of Deleuze and Guattari, in which these hierarchies are obliterated by the posthuman cyborg and the end of history<sup>8</sup>.

## 6.6: *Moulin Rouge!*, Youth Culture, and the MTV Aesthetic

Moulin Rouge!'s use of intertextuality to question humanist constructions of history and the body is reminiscent of the radical filming and editing conventions of music television (MTV). As this thesis has shown, since the late nineteenth century the seductive power of the irrational has been reproduced as images that can be harnessed for commercial and political purposes, such as in the cinema of attractions. In postmodernity, the dissolution of high/low, rational/irrational hierarchies has allowed this commercial aesthetic to proliferate. In film musicals, this has allowed the non-narrative, hypnotic aesthetic of the cinema of attractions to escape from the musical number and infiltrate the narrative of films such as Moulin Rouge!. Feuer (1993, 123) argues that this has been accompanied by a shift in the film musical audience from the mass audience presupposed by Rick Altman (1987) to specialised 'cult' audiences. For example, Luhrmann imagines his audience as follows:

Everything I've made on this 10-year journey has had exactly the same reaction and the same pattern. There was always this passion for, this passion against. It would not open in a spectacular way, and then it would go around the globe, gather momentum, and eventually it would take on this very committed audience. The audience would discover it.

Murray, no date [online]

Luhrmann's audience is defined by the characteristics of the global consumer market, in which products sell by offering objects or images around which emerging identities can solidify. In the early 1980s, music videos had begun to develop an aesthetic based on the techniques of contemporary advertising, as well as the irrational attractions of film musicals, offering an identity that rejects

the rational trappings of high culture, and engages in the commercial game of postmodern society, an identity associated largely, although not exclusively, with youth culture. This section looks at how Moulin Rouge! positions itself in the postindustrial marketplace by drawing on this 'MTV aesthetic' in its cultivation of a cinematic form for the postmodern age.

Larry Billman (1997) has traced the history of the emergence of music video, its rapid development after the launch of MTV in 1981, and cross-fertilisation between music video and the film musical genre during the 1980s and early 1990s. In music video the aesthetic of attractions that had developed in advertising was combined with the use of song and dance as an attraction in the Hollywood musical number, drawing on contemporary dance forms such as hip-hop and breakdancing. This resulted in the development of a filmmaking style in which virtuosic dance moves were subjected to rapid-fire editing (known as 'montage editing'), and dancers' bodies were fragmented by the camera. In this aesthetic, "the moving body interacts with the technology to form abstract visual and rhythmic patterning" (Buckland, 1998, 286), and it therefore produces a dancing body that might be described as a cyborg. Indeed, Sherril Dodds describes video dance bodies as low-tech cyborgs, or prosthetic techno-bodies (Dodds, 2001, 164 and 173), whose material bodies are temporarily augmented by the camera. In the case of music video, this posthuman form becomes a "consumer body" (Dodds, 2001, 135) - a body that is commodified and promoted – the postmodern equivalent of the dancer in the cinema of attractions. The MTV aesthetic constituted a postmodern cinema of attractions in which the aim was to

hypnotise the spectator through the ‘shock effect’ of images of bodies made irrational by their temporal and spatial dislocation.

It was recognised that this aesthetic appealed to younger spectators whose identity depended on rebelling against the more modernist aesthetics of their parents, for whom value was still defined by the hierarchy of rationality. Indeed, the editorial in a special MTV issue of the *Journal of Communication Inquiry* notes that, “the critical categories of modernism – signification, representation, ideology – are radically questioned by the seductive intensity, the speed, flow, and the open audio-visual textuality [of music television]” (anon. cited in Frith, 1988, 205). Martin Scorsese, speculating on Michael Jackson’s Beat It (1983) video, links this postmodern aesthetic to youth culture<sup>9</sup>:

Maybe the video itself is the dance. You know, the piece of film itself and the impression that it gives to the mind when you’re flashing by on those channels... maybe it speaks another language to a younger generation. Who knows?

Scorsese cited in Billman, 1997, 157-58

Billman demonstrates that the MTV aesthetic was appropriated by teen musicals such as Flashdance (1983) in the 1980s. This practice was frequently condemned by film critics. Some complained of sensory overload, such as the Variety reviewer who claimed that, “[w]atching Flashdance is pretty much like looking at MTV for 96 minutes” (anon. cited in Billman, 1997, 159). Others lamented the loss of spectatorial mastery over the choreography, such as the critics of Staying Alive (1983), who protested that, “it was difficult... to assess the skills of the choreographers and dancers, with all of the flash, smoke, and hysterical editing” (Billman, 1997, 165). The MTV aesthetic precluded the placement of the

spectacle in a hierarchy of value, by inviting an embodied response that denied the complete detachment of the rational observer. Rational regimes of viewing were being replaced by images that physically ‘hooked’ the spectator, in both aesthetic and commercial senses. Furthermore, the films which utilised this aesthetic could not be read as contained texts, but functioned within intertextual networks. As Dodds notes, drawing on the work of Andrew Wernick, promotion was becoming a culturally dominant aesthetic in which “[each] promotional message refers us to a commodity which is itself the site of another promotion” (Wernick cited in Dodds, 2001, 121). For example, Flashdance released an associated music video using footage from the film (Feuer, 1993, 132).

Moulin Rouge! took the MTV aesthetic of these films to an extreme. Mitchell comments that, “Mr. Luhrmann has made the first musical that trumps the achievement of MTV, producing whirlwind excitement on a steady schedule” (Mitchell, 2001 [online]). As in Flashdance, this aesthetic seeps out of the musical numbers, infecting the whole film with speed, fragmentation and intertextual references calculated to draw the eye. Arroyo describes it as, “a trailer stretched to feature length” (Arroyo, 2001, 50), emphasising its commercial power. Indeed, the intertextual tendrils of this aesthetic reach out beyond the film itself, into the promotional music video Lady Marmalade made for the film by Christina Aguilera, Pink, Mya, and Lil' Kim, for example. Furthermore, in 2004 Luhrmann turned Moulin Rouge!'s MTV aesthetic back towards strictly commercial ends by making an advert for Chanel No.5 based on the film's style and starring Nicole Kidman. Moulin Rouge! exemplifies the thin line between the aesthetic and commercial uses of the MTV aesthetic's hypnotic



allure. Both Simon Frith (1988, 206) and Theresa Buckland (1998, 285) argue that it is this dialectic between artistic and commercial concerns that makes the MTV aesthetic postmodern.

Moulin Rouge!'s use of intertextuality bears many resemblances to the intertextuality of the MTV aesthetic, described by Andrew Goodwin (1993) and E. Ann Kaplan (1987). Goodwin describes MTV as sliding between several different modes of quotation including pastiche, social criticism, parody, self-reflexive parody, promotion, and homage. For example, he notes the difficulty of discerning whether Madonna's Material Girl (1985) video is a pastiche or a homage to Marilyn Monroe's 'Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend' number in Gentlemen Prefer Blondes (1953) (Goodwin, 1993, 159). Kaplan makes the same point in her analysis of Material Girl, concluding that,

we cannot tell whether or not the Monroe sequence is being commented upon, simply used, or ridiculed by exaggeration (which sometimes seems to be happening). Things are more complicated by the fact that Gentlemen Prefer Blondes is itself a comedy, itself mocking and exaggerating certain patriarchal gender roles.

Kaplan, 1987, 122

Kaplan notes that Material Girl exemplifies the common music video practice of commenting on Hollywood film genres through, "incorporation, parody, pastiche, or ridicule" (Kaplan, 1987, 33-34). Material Girl, she argues, refers to the Hollywood musical while "routinely violat[ing]" its conventions. In Moulin Rouge!, the slippery relationship between music video and the film musical is made even more complex. Kidman's 'Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend' number refers to both Monroe's routine and Madonna's video. Kaplan notes that

Monroe's character, Lorelei, really is a material girl, searching for a rich man, whereas Madonna presents two personae in her video: that of the materialist pop star, and that of the 'real' Madonna (nevertheless a constructed character), who is not interested in wealth and possessions. Kidman's routine initially appears to be a pastiche of Monroe's number, but after a musical quotation from Material Girl, accompanied by a dance reference to Madonna's Vogue (1990) choreography, the 'real' Satine is revealed, who is not materialist, but only wants to be a real actress. Satine is constructed as both the original, *fin-de-siècle* material girl, preceding Monroe and Madonna, and the postmodern material girl, who draws on Monroe and Madonna, the 1950s and the 1980s, the film musical and the music video, in the construction of her femininity. In this sense, Moulin Rouge! extends the deconstruction of history that Kaplan argues takes place in MTV:

It cannot therefore be said either to represent a reaction to what went before or to foreshadow what will come hereafter. It is precisely those sorts of linear progressions that it violates in not situating itself within their parameters.

Kaplan, 1987, 10

Both music video and Moulin Rouge! make visible the end of history as a linear narrative. Kaplan recognises that, from a postmodern viewpoint, this could be seen as "an exhilarating move toward a heteroglossia that calls into question moribund pieties of a now archaic humanism" (Kaplan, 1987, 147-48). However, citing Jameson, she is also concerned that by deconstructing the old hierarchies on which Marxism and Freudianism were based, postmodernism represents the loss of a stable critical position from which one could place positive or negative value on social structures and ideologies. This has particular implications, she argues, for women, who struggled to achieve equal status with men on the

humanist scale, only to have that scale discredited. The same could be said of groups that have been excluded from the category ‘human’ on other grounds, such as racial difference.

The rhetoric of liberation and the essentialist notions of identity on which many feminist and anti-racist arguments have been based are indeed called into question by postmodernism. But Haraway argues that the shift from “an organic, industrial society to a polymorphous, information system” (Haraway, 1991, 161) has demanded a new politics based on complex, multiple, fragmentary, unbounded identities, irreconcilable with simplistic notions of liberation and enslavement. This new politics, she contends, is embodied in the hybrid figure of the cyborg. Chris Hables Gray and Steven Mentor agree, pointing out that,

[t]he promise and danger of the cyborgs we are/are becoming bear striking resemblance to what various feminists argue we need: the experience of difference without opposition, rejection of a science of origins and telos, an embracing and exploration of multiple overlapping subjectivities.

Gray and Mentor, 1995, 459

Hayles (1999) posits the counterargument that while the deconstruction of the liberal humanist subject in cybernetics bears many similarities with feminism and postcolonialism, it has typically differed in its marginalisation or erasure of the material body (see section 6.3.3). However, the posthuman bodies constructed in music video and Moulin Rouge! overcome this problem. On screen, performing bodies are created which are both intensely physical and permeated with technology, rendering them fragmented and infinitely manipulable. Off screen, spectators’ physical and emotional engagement with the

images is conducted via a mediated interface (for example, the remote control) that allows virtual embodiment of on screen identities while maintaining awareness of the film as artifice. Film theorist Kay Dickinson (2001 [online]) argues that the speed of the MTV aesthetic creates indistinct, unindividuated forms that correspond with the posthuman conception of the body advocated by Deleuze and Guattari:

Here, there are no longer any forms or developments of forms; nor are there subjects or the formation of subjects. There is no structure, any more than there is genesis. There are only relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness between unformed elements.... Nothing develops, but things arrive late or early, and form this or that assemblage depending on their compositions of speed.

Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, 266

These bodies are neither human nor inhuman, neither liberated nor enslaved. Their politics are based not on an assertion of liberal humanist status, but on a refusal to play the humanist game and conform to its categories. Here, resistance is constructed not by rejecting rationalism completely, as did the dancers and spectators at the nineteenth-century Moulin Rouge, because this reproduces the rational/irrational binary. Instead, this binary itself becomes the position against which resistance must be mounted.

Of course, although Haraway claims that she “would rather be a cyborg than a goddess” (1991, 181), not everyone in postmodernity chooses to be posthuman. Not everyone wishes to enter into Luhmann’s contract. Steve Dixon, in his book on Digital Performance (2007), reiterates Hayles’ point that, “[p]eople become posthuman when they think they are posthuman” (Hayles cited in Dixon, 2007, 152), commenting further that,

[a] nineteen-year-old computer hacker with multiple body piercings, for example, may consider herself a cyborg, while a ninety-year-old grandmother who never watches television, but wears spectacles, is unlikely to.

Dixon, 2007, 305

Similarly, many critics have rejected the posthuman bodies created by the MTV aesthetic in Moulin Rouge!. Leydon comments that Lurhmann's, "dance sequences are made into chaotic abstractions by rapid-fire editing" (Leydon, no date [online]) and Maitland McDonagh concludes that,

[h]e's learned all the wrong lessons from dissident movie musicals like Cabaret, filling dance sequences with fragmented, Fosse-esque shots of moving body parts without extending their isolated kineticism through editing.

McDonagh, no date, [online]

Postmodernism and posthumanism do not represent a complete break with or replacement of modernist and humanist frameworks of value; the latter still exert considerable influence in Western society. Gray and Mentor (1995) acknowledge that cyborg politics constitute a political mythology to which the realities of postmodern life are a messy approximation:

The cyborg body politic is a myth, not truth; we acknowledge the presence of other figuring discourses within these sciences and current bodies politic – discourses of war and mastery, of command and control, of disease and pollution, of liberation of autonomy, of gender and race and class.

Gray and Mentor, 1995, 464

As a form of resistance that operates through commercial media products, the MTV aesthetic is difficult to reconcile with persisting modernist notions of

freedom and enslavement. Friedberg (1993, 189-90) concludes her book on cinema in postmodernity by comparing the postmodern rhetoric of the demolition of the culture industry in favour of freedom of choice, with Jean-François Lyotard's claim that contemporary society remains totalising, and choice is merely an illusion. Echoing Lyotard, Kaplan reiterates Jameson's concern that,

society now takes into itself whatever is produced from a counter-culture, such as punk rock and sexually explicit material. Far from this material being condemned by the establishment, it is rather made into a successful commercial commodity.

Kaplan, 1987, 146-47

Like Theodor Adorno (1991, see section 4.7), Kaplan postulates that apparently liberating counter-aesthetics are merely absorbed into the rationalising culture industry. Dixon (2007) recalls Harald Begush's equally dystopian view of the digital body as,

a weightless shell, as a translation of physical materiality into a controllable code, as the realization of the Cartesian fantasy of the calculable, or as an expression of the occidental image of a smooth, mouldable and controllable body.

Begush cited in Dixon, 2007, 233

However, cyborg identity is precisely about the recognition that the completely rationalised, enslaved body, and the completely irrational, liberated body, are just as mythical as the cyborg. The posthuman body offers a new, alternative mythology for surviving the postmodern world, constructed for, and sometimes by, the youth who will inherit it. In this model, the mass media are not conceived either as rationalising the individual through mass production, or seducing

her/him through irrational aesthetics. Haraway posits that the cyborg world signifies *both* “the final imposition of a grid of control on the planet” and “lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints” (1991, 154). “The political struggle,” she argues, “is to see from both perspectives at once, because each reveals both dominations and possibilities unimaginable from the other vantage point” (1991, 154). As a hybrid of the liberal humanist subject and machine technology, in which the boundary between rational and irrational dissolves, the cyborg offers a form of embodiment from within which both perspectives are possible. From this viewpoint, images produced by the mass media may seduce us, but also offer an infinite range of positions with which the spectator might identify. This position represents a rejection of the Enlightenment dichotomy between rationality and irrationality. By constructing the body as posthuman, the MTV aesthetic and Moulin Rouge! therefore provide “some form of ‘resistance’ for a youth audience despite, even regardless of its entrenchment in big business” (Dickinson, 2001 [online]). Dickinson comments that, “these subjects [are] neither dupes or revolutionaries” (Dickinson, 2001 [online]); they are neither the dupes of Adorno’s culture industry, nor the revolutionaries of the *fin-de-siècle* cancan. Instead they forge an identity beyond the politics of freedom and enslavement, embodied in the hybrid figure of the cyborg who can plug into the array of images offered by postindustrial society.

## 6.7: Conclusion

Moulin Rouge! can be seen as part of the re-emergence of the cinema of attractions in a postmodern context in which the hierarchy of rationality that had previously animated the attraction, has broken down. The humanist spectator, nostalgically seeking a return to an irrational past as an escape from the mechanised present, is replaced in Moulin Rouge! by a posthuman spectator whose body can be merged with machines which facilitate virtual embodiment of a cinematically reconstructed past. The digitextual evocation of past images on the screen no longer generates the uncanny impression of a ghost, because embodiment and mediation are reconcilable for the human-machine hybrid viewer. However, the virtual spaces that the posthuman spectator inhabits, in which embodiment and mediation can be experienced simultaneously, are also politically complex spaces where immersion in the past and critique of the past must be negotiated. This is exemplified by the cancan sequence in Moulin Rouge!, which becomes a minefield of past body politics for both the choreographer and the spectator. This sequence also epitomises the film's MTV aesthetic, which challenges linear accounts of history and humanist conceptions of the body. Perhaps for these reasons, not everyone chooses to be a posthuman spectator, instead reading Moulin Rouge!'s offer of virtual embodiment as an assault on the rational body or irrational chaos. However, those who accept Luhrmann's contract may experience an alternative, cyborg identity, in which their embodied participation in the commercial, interactive game of postmodern culture signals their resistance against the hierarchy of rationality on which the



aesthetics of freedom and enslavement had previously been based. They become virtual dancers in a new, posthuman cancan.

## **Conclusions: Dancing on a Volcano**

The focus of this thesis has been the cancan, and its relationship to post-Enlightenment tensions between rationality and irrationality. In particular, I have sought to demonstrate in this thesis the complex ways in which the cancan becomes a particularly salient mediator of these tensions at certain moments in its history. By drawing on postmodern cultural theory and a range of disciplinary perspectives, the thesis aims to contribute to research in dance studies, cultural approaches to history, and film studies. In these concluding remarks, the overall argument will be summarised, the implications of this argument drawn out, and possible directions for future research suggested.

The cancan emerges from this thesis as a dance practice through which the divergent accounts of human history and identity founded in the Enlightenment have been physically negotiated over the last two hundred and fifty years. In eighteenth-century France, the vision of humanity as engaged in a linear, inexorable development from primitive, irrational enslavement to civilised, rational freedom, advocated by a number of philosophers, was countered by an alternative conviction that rationalisation was in fact leading humanity away from the liberty of the state of nature, into a new form of slavery. The struggle between these positions would be physically enacted during the nineteenth century through a series of violent political revolutions, and through dance forms in which performing bodies became the site of fierce social debate. Among these dance forms, which also included the quadrille and romantic ballet, the cancan was perhaps the most contentious, and yet has been the least well studied.

The cancan developed as a form of bodily resistance against the Enlightenment privileging of the rational as the *telos* of human history. However, for its first, working-class performers, the cancan represented not a philosophical stance, but a political/personal one, embodying both a utopian mass body politic, and an individual exhibitionism that both imitated and mocked the posturing of the bourgeoisie. The dance quickly became fashionable among the latter, for whom it represented their contradictory and precarious position as both the beneficiaries and potential victims of the mass politics of the undifferentiated crowd. But the dangerous irrationality of this form of embodiment was increasingly projected onto working-class women, who could turn physical seduction to their economic advantage, while bourgeois men retreated from participation into spectatorship. By the 1890s, the mass production of irrational female dancing bodies had been turned into an industry in which the liberatory, but potentially degenerative effects of watching the cancan were sold to the bourgeoisie as an ambivalent performance of the increasingly institutionalised liberalism of the Third Republic.

The capturing of the cancan in the cinema of attractions of the 1890s was an extension of this mass production of irrationality for commercial ends. As such, it only magnified the uncanny fascination of the cancan dancer's performance of the runaway machine. But in the same decade, the dancing of Loïe Fuller set a precedent for the technological rationalisation of the female dancing body that would inspire the aesthetics of narrative cinema. France's new self-image as a modernised nation was embodied by Fuller, and this led to the French

importation, acceptance and development of rationalised versions of the cancan that had been cultivated in Britain and the United States. However, the rationalisation of the dance did not exorcise its irrational history, which remained as a spectre of its repressed past into the 1920s. Disturbing for some, the notion that the rationalised image held an underlying attraction inspired others.

Filmmakers, for example, sought to revive the cinema of attractions, either as avant-garde films, as moralising yet seductive narrative films about the cancan, or, in the 1930s, as musical numbers within the new film musicals. The latter coincided with scholarly investigations of the history of the body and mass-mechanised culture by intellectuals who were marginalised or persecuted by political regimes that had appropriated the harnessing of mass irrationality as a technique of power. In mass cinematic choreography and these early analyses of the political manipulation of bodies and aesthetic means of resistance to it, the revolutionary potential of the irrational body was excavated at the very moment of its most extreme perversion.

In the Second World War, France became a battleground in the fight against the abuse of mass politics. Following the war, France remained a battleground in a new ideological war that was framed by the United States as a struggle for the mass culture of freedom against the mass politics of tyranny practiced by the Soviets. The Cold War produced a new politics of American identity in which harnessing the seductive powers of irrationality was justified as long as its purpose was to promote 'democratic' values. In the 1950s, American film directors sought to claim this identity by aligning themselves with the French artists and impresarios who captured and mass produced the cancan as an image.

Appropriation was recognised as a powerful aesthetic through which individuals and nations could influence the global masses while proclaiming their liberal individualism. However, in the 1960s and 1970s, as more and more groups claimed their share of American liberalism, the cancan, marked by its historical involvement in the cultivation of the male gaze, the female body as spectacle, and the regimented body of mass politics, lost cultural and political potency.

At the turn of the millennium, however, post-war liberal politics have been recognised by some as reliant on the Enlightenment, humanist model of the subject as individual, rational and universal. As posthuman bodies are constructed, in which boundaries between inside and outside, rational and irrational, human and machine, are dissolved, the cancan dancer and spectator return as pre-posthuman bodies. Whereas the nineteenth-century cancan subverted humanism from the inside, the twenty-first-century cancan, exemplified by Baz Luhrmann's Moulin Rouge! (2001), looks back on humanism from its ruins. As such, it not only revives the cancan's critique of the rational body, but it fulfils the persistent threat of the dance to challenge linear notions of history as a progression towards the rationalisation of humanity. The history of the cancan traced in this thesis therefore supports Robert Young's claim that,

post-Modernity marks the articulation and maturation of an inner dissonance that had quickly developed within the Enlightenment project – something that has previously gone by different names such as Romanticism.

Young, 1995, 54

The cancan physically mediated this rupture in the Enlightenment project from the artistic manifestation of the rational/irrational schism as romanticism, to the erasure of the boundary between rationality and irrationality in postmodernism. It is therefore possible to trace, in the changing configurations of the bodies of cancan dancers and spectators, the winding course of this rupture as it snakes through the post-Enlightenment history of Western culture. It is the historical and cultural significance of this practice of “dancing on a volcano” (Goudeau cited in Rearick, 1988, 39) that this thesis has sought to address<sup>1</sup>.

This study has several implications for research in dance and in cultural history. Firstly, it substantiates Michel Foucault’s premise that the body interacts on a fundamental and complex level with cultural and historical forces. However, whereas for Foucault “[t]he body is the inscribed surface of events” and is therefore “a body totally imprinted by history” (Foucault, 1984, 83), the cancan-dancing body both reflects changing cultural and historical formations, and performs potentially new identities, corporealities, and histories. For example, the cancan’s performance of a pathological, hysterical body preceded the development of the epileptic aesthetic (Gordon, 2001b) by approximately thirty-five years, and its performance of the mechanical other preceded widespread avant-garde interest in the attractions of mechanised bodies by nearly a century. The body makes visible forces and tensions that, for many reasons, may not, or not yet, be verbalised, and therefore manifests different histories than those gleaned from purely written evidence. This applies particularly to the dancing body, whose relation to its cultural and historical context, whether one of

reflection, inversion, subversion, parody, and so on, is made more visible by its status as a framed or heightened form of embodiment.

Secondly, this thesis attests to the importance of factoring popular culture into histories of the post-Enlightenment period. Not only does this avoid the reproduction of elite constructions of history, but it also allows an interrogation of the forces that create, maintain and subvert separations between elite and popular cultures. This stance has political as well as academic implications for histories written in the wake of humanism and modernism. My research on the cancan as a popular dance form makes the case for a revision of the dance history canon, but also makes visible some of the processes by which Enlightenment philosophy created hierarchical ideological structures that allowed power to be exerted on and contested through bodies over the following centuries, precipitating the historical and cultural formations of modernity and postmodernity.

For example, one such process highlighted in this thesis is the construction of rationality and irrationality as the ‘natural’ extremities of the Enlightenment trajectory of human history. By reading this construction not as natural, but as historical, political and strategic, rationality and irrationality can be reinterpreted as linguistic and physical weapons in post-Enlightenment struggles over the distribution of social and political power. Indeed, this is an interpretation towards which the cancan had always pointed in its performance of irrationality out of the natural order of linear history. In postmodernity, the cancan’s performative subversion of Enlightenment humanism transforms into the Western cultural

project of rereading and politicising the past, performed not least in postmodern scholarship.

The third implication of this thesis for research in dance and in cultural history is its contention that the relationship between the body and technology is not merely one of agent to tool, and that the relationship between dance and film is not simply one of performance to medium. Rather, these relationships have developed through the complex histories of Western capitalism, industrialisation and mass culture, which have been intimately intertwined with Western body politics since at least the seventeenth century. Furthermore, this thesis refutes the Marxist notion that these social changes are exclusively led by technology. Rather, the body and technology are bound in a complex process of cultural change in which the body, and particularly dance, sometimes corporealise changes that have yet to ramify throughout the system (such as the mechanisation of the human figure), and technological developments sometimes have wide ranging cultural and physical effects (such as photography).

These implications of my thesis point towards several possible directions for future research. For example, the cancan is only one of many popular dance forms whose histories may weave differing relations between the body, culture and time. Popular dance forms whose live and screen histories are only beginning to be constructed include burlesque (see Allen, 1991), blackface minstrelsy (see, for example, Lott, 1993; Lhamon Jr., 1998; Rogin, 1998; Parfitt, 2002), and Western interpretations of belly dancing, such as the ‘hootchy-cootchy’ (see Allen, 1991) and *danse du ventre* (see Décoret-Ahiha, 2004).



Analysis of these dance forms may allow researchers to further reconstruct the operations of power in and through the body since the Enlightenment.

The framework outlined in this thesis of the historical construction of rational and irrational bodies, could also be applied beyond the cancan to other dance forms and physical practices. For example, Mark Franko's (1993) use of Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the grotesque in analysing burlesque ballet, and my brief consideration of romantic ballet, suggest that this model might benefit ballet historians. Furthermore, notions of rationality and irrationality might be applied to many aspects of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French history and culture, such as bohemianism, hysteria, and political violence, as Dorinda Outram (1989) has shown in her use of these terms in relation to the French Revolution.

A further implication of this thesis is its demonstration and substantiation of Norman Bryson's (1997) claim that the changes in relations between the body and technology due to the growth of capitalism, industrialisation, and mass culture, provide a fertile area for dance research, in terms of the ways the dancing body has performed, mediated and resisted the rapid and overwhelming changes in Western society since the Enlightenment. Such research is particularly relevant to the current moment in Western cultural history, in which the body is, more than ever, infiltrated by technologies which question its very coherence and integrity. As dance practitioners engage more and more deeply with new technologies, it becomes increasingly necessary for scholars to situate this practice historically and culturally.

Finally, there are many aspects of the cancan's history that require further research. For example, the connection between the *fin-de-siècle* cancan and the precision kickline of the 1920s is very poorly documented (see section 4.3). Moreover, while this thesis has focused on the cancan on screen after the turn of the twentieth century, the proliferation of the cancan in the twentieth century as a live performance practice, a process that continues into the new millennium, has only been touched on by researchers (for example, Price, 1998). I was recently informed of a French dancer who performs the cancan for private parties in Paris<sup>2</sup>. The Moulin Rouge now offers a show based more on the revelation of breasts than legs, interspersed with novelty acts and camp male dancers, to a tourist crowd perhaps inspired to visit the venue by Moulin Rouge!. And in London, the cancan forms part of the new burlesque scene, appearing in themed nights and the work of the CanCan Bohème troupe, who offer workshops in the dance. The Enlightenment tensions that first led dancers to raise their legs continue to animate postmodern culture, and therefore the cancan, and the technological, commercial, political and scholarly machines bent on capturing it, keep on kicking.

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## Endnotes

### Chapter 1: Literature Review and Methodologies

<sup>1</sup> A request to interview the director, Baz Luhrmann, was unfortunately denied.

### Chapter 2: Revolting Bodies: The Nineteenth-Century Cancan as a Performance of Irrationality and Liberalism

<sup>1</sup> A similar argument is made by Robert Young (1995). However, Young sees the Rousseauian tradition as countering Enlightenment theory, whereas I argue that the Enlightenment contains the seeds of both progressivism and primitivism.

<sup>2</sup> See Mark Franko (1993) for a discussion of the burlesque ballet that preceded the accession of Louis XIV, and of the standardisation of training and technique that he introduced.

<sup>3</sup> Although Michel Foucault does develop the idea of fear of the irrational body in Madness and Civilisation: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason (2001).

<sup>4</sup> The masculine pronoun is intentional, relating to the gendering of the romantic artist/spectator to be discussed later in this section.

<sup>5</sup> The irrationalism of romantic subject matter may not be immediately apparent in, for example, landscape poetry, but Padmini Ray Murray (Murray, 2006) has argued that Lord Byron feminised and Orientalised the land in his poems, colonising it with his gaze.

<sup>6</sup> See Jerrold Seigel (1999) for an extended discussion of the mutually defining relationship between bourgeois and bohemian. According to Seigel, the term 'bohemian', denoting a specific kind of artistic, anti-materialistic lifestyle, only gained common usage in France in the 1830s and 1840s, and derived from the term 'bohémien', used to refer to gypsies, who were commonly thought to have originated in Bohemia, a province now in the Czech Republic.

<sup>7</sup> See Frances Connelly (1995) for a discussion of the use of primitivism against the classical, academic ideal in modern art.

<sup>8</sup> The art historian Timothy J. Clark (1985, 205) has made a similar argument with regard to the later nineteenth century, that popular culture allowed the *petit-bourgeois* to exhibit both their identity with and difference from the lower classes.

<sup>9</sup> See Naomi J. Andrews (2002) for a discussion of femininity in the romantic socialism of Pierre Leroux and the Abbé A.-L. Constant

<sup>10</sup> As Franko (1993) notes, the androgyne also appeared as a subversive figure in the grotesque-influenced burlesque ballet of the early seventeenth century.

<sup>11</sup> The English translation of the French Penal Code lists a version of Article 330 that was amended in 1863 to read, "Any person who commits an indecent exposure shall be punished by jailing from three months to two years and by a fine of 50,000 to 450,000 francs" (Mueller, 1960, 113). It is unclear whether or how this may have differed from the wording of the article in 1831.

<sup>12</sup> It is worth noting here Dorinda Outram's (1995) observation that for much of the eighteenth century the word 'revolution' retained its mechanical and astronomical meaning of "turning full circle", so that a political revolution entailed "change bringing back a former state of affairs" (1995, 136). She argues that the word only started to signify progress after the American Revolutionary War (1775-1783). However, anxiety over the historical meaning of revolution in the French nineteenth century suggests that the original, mechanical meaning of the word did not disappear, but re-emerged in anti-rationalist or alarmist readings of history as repetition or reversal.

<sup>13</sup> I have referred to two different translations of this novel, one by Robert Baldick (1964), and the other by Douglas Parmee (2000).

<sup>14</sup> Clownism was the name given by Jean-Martin Charcot to the second stage in his classification of hystero-epileptic attacks (Gordon, 2001b). The Salpêtrière was an institution used in the late-nineteenth century for the treatment of hysterics and the study of hysteria, presided over by Charcot.

<sup>15</sup> Sexual and racial degeneracy were collapsed together in a different way in the body of the black, male Moulin Rouge dancer Chocolat, who Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec immortalised in his sketch Chocolat dansant dans le bar d'Achille (1896). See Rae Beth Gordon (2003, 633-34) for a discussion of his sexualisation in French popular culture of the 1890s.

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<sup>16</sup> Social evolutionary thought conflated racial difference with the biological difference between primitive and modern humans, drawing on the division of human history into phases of savagery, barbarism and civilisation by the eighteenth-century philosopher Charles de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu (1777).

<sup>17</sup> Although female suffrage would not be granted until 1945 (Gorrara and Langford, 2003, 150).

### Chapter 3: The Ghost in the Dancing Machine

<sup>1</sup> According to Hermann von Helmholtz's law, "the forces of nature (mechanical, electrical, chemical, and so forth) are forms of a single, universal energy, or Kraft, that cannot be either added to or destroyed" (Rabinbach, 1990, 3).

<sup>2</sup> By contrast, Eadweard Muybridge's chronophotography involved the capture of serial images in separate frames.

<sup>3</sup> E.T.A. Hoffmann is the pen name of Ernst Theodor Wilhelm Hoffmann (1776-1822). The 1885 publication of 'The Sandman' used here, included in the first volume of the anthology Weird Tales, refers to the author using the initials of his birth name (E.T.W. Hoffmann). I have followed this spelling in my bibliography, whereas in the main text I refer to the author by his more common designation, E.T.A. Hoffmann.

<sup>4</sup> Gilbert Ryle, writing in 1949, was referring, derogatorily, to René Descartes' notion of the mind as a non-physical substance within the machine of the body (2000).

<sup>5</sup> Fear of this reversal continued to be explored and exploited by writers and artists into the twentieth century. For example, Fritz Lang's Metropolis (1927) is animated by many of the same themes as Tomorrow's Eve. A robot, created for the master of Metropolis as a means of suppressing the workers, and made in the image of their female leader, Maria, runs out of control, driving men to violence with her seductive dancing, and inciting the workers to destroy the machines that enslave them.

<sup>6</sup> I borrow this term from Felicia McCarren (2003, 9).

<sup>7</sup> See Naomi Jackson (2001) for a summary of the history of automata and puppets in ballet.

<sup>8</sup> *Cartes de visite* were small photographic prints mounted on card. Their size and weight made them easy to carry or post, and therefore suitable for exchange.

<sup>9</sup> For example, stereoscopes were commercially produced after 1851 and stereoviewers became common in middle-class homes by the 1880s (Conrich, 2007 [email to author]).

<sup>10</sup> Jodi Sperling defines the term 'nautch' as follows: "Nautch is a vague, Westernized term that was used to describe much Indian dance from the 18<sup>th</sup> century through the 1920s. The term 'nautch girl' generally indicated a female performer associated with a certain class of performing courtesans. The main constant of the nautch numbers presented in Western theaters was, of course, a big skirt." (Sperling, 2001, 3-4 [online]).

<sup>11</sup> François Delsarte created a system of expression based on aesthetic, scientific and moral principles, in which specific gestures, attitudes and vocal techniques were invested with spiritual significance.

<sup>12</sup> Laura Mulvey (2006) argues that cinema continues a line of uncanny visual technologies dating back to the phantasmagorias of the eighteenth century, which used magic lantern projections of ghosts to challenge the audience's rationality. On the uncanniness of the phantasmagoria see Terry Castle (1995).

<sup>13</sup> In 1903 Georg Simmel described, "the rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions. These are the psychological conditions which the metropolis creates" (Simmel, 1950, 410).

<sup>14</sup> There is some debate as to whether any films of Loïe Fuller herself exist. Giovanni Lista, who has researched the films of Fuller imitators in France, claims that no films have been found of Fuller performing (Brannigan, 2003, note 12). However, after comparing these films with other sources such as photographs, Elizabeth Coffman (2002), argues that the dancer in Fire Dance (1906) and Crissie Sheridan (1897) is Fuller.

<sup>15</sup> Early American dance films drew on the same aesthetic by filming burlesque performers, who had been developing irrational performance in that country since the 1860s. See Robert Allen's (1991) history of American burlesque, although Allen argues that the live attraction of burlesque was extinguished by the mediation of film. By contrast, the argument advanced here is that the seductive performer/spectator relation was broken not by film itself, but by the development of narrative film shortly afterwards. Lynda Nead (2005) makes a similar argument, but marginalises the connection between the hypnotic effect of early film and that of live performance, claiming that the embodied spectator was invented by cinema.

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<sup>16</sup> Gordon (2001a, 535) makes a similar argument.

<sup>17</sup> According to Franko (1993) the opposition between danced attraction and narrative in Western performance arts emerged in seventeenth-century burlesque ballet in which narrative was replaced by choreography as the primary means of expression.

#### **Chapter 4: Kicking Against the March of Rationality: The Cancan on Stage and Screen in the Interwar Period**

<sup>1</sup> This is *Shadows of the Moulin Rouge* (1913). I have not been able to locate a viewing copy of this film, but its setting in the Moulin Rouge suggests that it may have featured a cancan.

<sup>2</sup> The cancan also appeared in *Nana* (1926) during this period, but this film will not be discussed here. Unlike *The Phantom of the Moulin Rouge* and *Moulin Rouge*, which were set in the contemporary Moulin Rouge of the 1920s, *Nana* is set in 1869, and therefore the issues it raises with regard to the cancan are slightly different. The film *Queen of the Moulin Rouge* (1922) may also have featured a cancan, but, again, I have been unable to locate a viewing copy.

<sup>3</sup> See Laurent Guido's (2006) discussion of the "photogenic girl" in film and cinema magazines of the 1920s, and Ramsay Burt's (1998, 101-120) discussion of the right-wing and left-wing uses of mass gymnastic displays in Weimar and Nazi Germany.

<sup>4</sup> Although the cancan had been performed in Britain as a social dance since at least 1842 (Price, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> According to Christophe Mirambeau (2004) the Barrison Sisters premiered at the Moulin Rouge in 1898.

<sup>6</sup> Josephine Baker (1906-1975) was an African-American dancer and later singer who moved to Paris in 1925 to appear in *La Revue Nègre* at the *Théâtre des Champs Elysée* and performed in France to great acclaim for the rest of her life. The connection between the cancan and black dance can only have been strengthened when another African-American revue, *Blackbirds of 1928*, played a successful run at the Moulin Rouge in 1929 (Pessis and Crepineau, 1990, 144-45).

<sup>7</sup> Gordon (2001b) does not in fact employ Tom Gunning's (1990) distinction between the cinema of attractions and narrative cinema, but rather highlights the continuous reference to the epileptic aesthetic in the first two decades of cinema.

<sup>8</sup> Gunning's (1990) term 'cinema of attractions' explicitly references Sergei Eisenstein's 'montage of attractions'.

<sup>9</sup> Filippo Marinetti wrote in his 'Manifesto of Futurist Dance' of 1917 that, "[o]ne must imitate the movements of machines with gestures; pay assiduous court to steering wheels, ordinary wheels, pistons, thereby preparing the fusion of man with the machine, to achieve the metallicity of the Futurist dance" (Marinetti, 1972, 138).

<sup>10</sup> Marinetti's 1917 'Manifesto of Futurist Dance' constitutes an early example of Fuller's influence on early-twentieth-century European avant-gardes, although without reference to film in this case. Marinetti condemns the "undulations of Montmartre thighs" in the cancan as, "an erotic passéist anachronism for foreigners", and instead asserts that, "[w]e futurists prefer Louie [sic] Fuller and the 'cakewalk' of the Negroes (utilization of electric light and mechanisms)" (Marinetti, 1972, 137 and 138). Marinetti presumably appreciated Fuller's use of technology to rationalise the "spasmodic sensuality" (1972, 137) that he objected to in the work of Isadora Duncan. However, his use of terms such as "palpitation", "jerks", "shivering", and "frenzied" in his description of "the first three Futurist dances" (1972, 139-41), aligns him more closely with the irrational aesthetic of the mechanical other that Fuller explored in her *Salomé* productions (see section 2.8).

<sup>11</sup> In the French version, Dr. Renault is called Dr. Window.

<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Anne Friedberg (1993, 100) observes that in René Clair's 1923 short film, *Paris Qui Dort* (*The Crazy Ray*), a scientist invents an invisible ray that reproduces cinema's capacity to stop, fast forward and reverse motion, visualising cinema's effect on narrative.

<sup>13</sup> Georges Méliès was a theatrical magician before recognising the illusory potential of cinema.

<sup>14</sup> Like the cancan, jazz music in Europe and the United States in the 1920s and 1930s connoted both the hypnotic compulsion of mass culture, and the potential of escape from it. David Stowe argues, regarding swing dance in the New Deal United States, that "[f]or the moralists, jitterbugs combined two unsavoury tendencies in American culture: the hedonism and uninhibited exhibitionism of African-American culture coupled with the mindless 'mass man' behaviour symptomatic of and conducive to totalitarian societies" (Stowe cited in Back, 1997, 177).

<sup>15</sup> St. Vitus Dance is a disorder causing jerky, uncontrolled movements, often associated with hysteria and used to describe the hysterical movements of the cancan in the nineteenth century.

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<sup>16</sup> Indeed, as Burt (1998, 85) shows, Siegfried Kracauer himself became increasingly pessimistic regarding the mass ornament's rational, liberatory capacities, in response to the rise of fascism in Germany, evidenced in his writings of 1931 and 1947.

<sup>17</sup> In this respect, Walter Benjamin's historical materialism appears quite different to Karl Marx's materialist conception of history as a series of developmental stages (Marx, 1977). For a discussion of these differences, as well as a reconciliation of Benjamin's and Marx's models, see Ronald Beiner (1984).

<sup>18</sup> Two of these Hollywood musicals were entitled Moulin Rouge, but neither of these are discussed in this chapter for the following reasons. The first was directed by Sidney Lanfield (1934) and features very little reference to its French setting at all, let alone to the cancan. The second, directed by Yves Mirande and André Hugon (1940), was a reworking of Princess Tam-Tam (1935) in response to American censorship of Josephine Baker's dance routines and hints of miscegenation in the original narrative (Erickson, no date [online]). This film may have featured the cancan, but I have been unable to locate a viewing copy for verification.

<sup>19</sup> See Martin Rubin (1993) for a detailed analysis of the continuity between the tradition of mass spectacle and Busby Berkeley.

<sup>20</sup> See Mulvey's (1989) influential work on the male gaze and the female spectacle, in which Berkeley is mentioned.

<sup>21</sup> This cinematization of the cancan's movements during the 1930s was mirrored in the use of the Moulin Rouge as a cinema from 1929-1940 (Pessis and Crepineau, 1990, 150).

## **Chapter 5: Americans in Paris: The Cold War Redeployment of the Cancan in 1950s film musicals**

<sup>1</sup> In the realm of high art, Naima Prevots (1998) has already demonstrated that the worldwide touring of modern dance companies and artists supported by the President's Emergency Fund for International Affairs during the 1950s and early 1960s, was influenced to a certain extent by Cold War politics.

<sup>2</sup> These include: Ambassadeurs: Aristide Bruant (poster) (1892); Yvette Guilbert saluant le public (1894); Oscar Wilde (1895); La Danse au Moulin-Rouge: la Goulue et Valentin le Désossé (1895); La Danse mauresque (Les Almées) (1895); and La Clownesse Assise, Mademoiselle Cha-U-Kao (1896)

<sup>3</sup> Described by Rick Altman (1987) as the dual-focus narrative.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Angela Dalle Vacche (1996, 34) describes Chocolat as hailing from Bilbao in Spain, whereas Davinia Caddy (2007) identifies him as a Cuban dancer named Raphaël Padilla.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Pick (1989, 237) argues that during the interwar period French, British, Russian and American commentators sought to distance themselves from degeneration theory (the theory that social evolutionism can run in reverse, creating irrationality where there was once rationality), and by 1945 its associations with fascist eugenics and 'The Final Solution' led to its widespread disavowal. The biological differentiation between rational and irrational bodies could no longer be scientifically justified.

<sup>6</sup> Pierre Nora (1998) states that with the establishment of France as a Republic in 1880, the nation gained a national emblem, a national anthem, a national holiday and a national motto.

<sup>7</sup> According to Raymond Durgnat, "[t]he Franco-Russian alliance was actually signed in 1894 and the Russian fleet paid a visit to France in 1892" (Durgnat, 1974, 306), whereas the opening of the Moulin Rouge depicted in the final scene took place in 1889.

<sup>8</sup> André Bazin is speaking specifically of the films of Marcel Carné.

<sup>9</sup> The role was eventually played by the French actress Françoise Arnoul.

<sup>10</sup> Marta Savigliano (1995) uses this term in the context of the Argentinian reappropriation of the French exoticisation of the tango, in an attempt to seize the power of the exoticising gaze from the coloniser. However, Savigliano argues that this act is doomed to failure, since it only reinforces the original exoticisation of the colonised.

<sup>11</sup> Nothing has been published on Claude Grandjean, other than his credit as choreographer for French Cancan.

<sup>12</sup> This also includes John Huston's opening cancan, in which the dancers are depicted as jungle animals, and the 1920s cancan films, but not the 'American in Paris Ballet', in which the cancan's mediation and reconstruction, first by Toulouse-Lautrec, and then by Gene Kelly, was made clear.

<sup>13</sup> This model of Communism diverges both from the model of a free society based on the female or androgynous irrational body proposed by the utopian socialists of the 1830s (Andrews, 2002;

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2003, see chapter 2), and from Marx and Friedrich Engels' embrace of the materiality of the body on the basis that sexual repression causes alienation from one's own body and from the external world (Feuer, 1962 [online]). Marx and Engels illustrate this point by parodying the critics of the cancan:

The reverend parson speaks here neither of the cancan nor of the polka, but of dancing in general, of the category Dancing, which is not performed anywhere except in his Critical cranium. If he saw a single dance at the Chaumbré in Paris his Christian-German soul would be outraged by the boldness, the frankness, the graceful petulance and the music of that most sensual movement.

Feuer, 1962 [online]

Lewis Feuer (1962 [online]) attributes Nikita Khrushchev's rejection of the cancan to a political morality of "Bolshevik virtue" fostered since the 1917 revolution.

## **Chapter 6: The Cancan as Virtual Dance: Moulin Rouge! (2001) and the Posthuman Spectator**

<sup>1</sup> See Fredric Jameson (1991) for the definitions of parody and pastiche on which Jane Feuer draws.

<sup>2</sup> Feuer rejects the notion of 'anti-musicals' (Feuer, 1993, 107). I use it here not as a critical concept, but merely as a convenient term with which to group together films such as Cabaret and Nashville (1975), that challenged film musical conventions.

<sup>3</sup> I argue that the gazes offered are a colonial, Orientalising gaze, which fixes the identities of spectator and spectacle into a hierarchical relationship; a neo-colonial gaze, which allows spectator and spectacle to enter into an apparently equal relationship; and a return of the gaze (following Bhabha, 1994a), which turns an exoticising gaze back upon the exoticisers. I argue that the camerawork positions the spectator in relation to these gazes throughout the film, but particularly in the musical numbers. In these numbers the choreography consists not just of the movement of the performers, but of the relationship between their movement, the movement of the camera(s), and the gaze of the spectator.

<sup>4</sup> It might be noted here that the trend towards interactivity in performance does not always involve mediating technologies. For example, live contemporary dance works by European companies and choreographers such as La Ribot and Felix Ruckert often encourage interaction between spectators and performers, and the new burlesque scenes in New York and London have revived a live performer/audience interaction based on seduction that is reminiscent of the *fin-de-siècle* cancan, as well as nineteenth- and twentieth-century American and British burlesque. Postmodern dance forms have also developed the dissolution of boundaries between performing bodies themselves (rather than, or as well as, between performer and spectator). In the same year that Moulin Rouge! was released (2001), Ann Cooper Albright (2001) argued that dance forms such as capoeira and contact improvisation encourage participants to open their bodies to exchanges of weight, momentum, speed and movement with other bodies, creating a state of disorientation in which body and mind, self and other can no longer be distinguished. She places these "open bodies" in the context of the postcolonial shift away from the notion of the individual body conquering space, and the post-Cold War rejection of a rational body politic based on exclusion of foreign bodies. Furthermore, Valerie Briginshaw (2001) points out that postmodern danceworks often blur the boundaries of the individual body, engaging in the rejection of the Cartesian model of the bounded, rational subject. Moulin Rouge! is part of this wider reconfiguration of the body in postmodernity.

<sup>5</sup> From E.M. Forster's 1910 novel Howard's End (1973, 183).

<sup>6</sup> See also Luhrmann's quote regarding the Moulin Rouge as a rave in the introduction to section 6.3.

<sup>7</sup> John O'Connell did not deliberately draw on hip-hop in his choreography (O'Connell, 2005), but the Zidler's Rap section, music produced in collaboration with the rap artist Lil' Kim, and Luhrmann's comments suggest that the director had hip-hop in mind.

<sup>8</sup> See Foucault's introduction to Anti-Oedipus (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984), in which he emphasises the post-Freudian, post-Marxist aspects of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's work.

<sup>9</sup> Larry Billman claims that Martin Scorsese directed Beat It, but all the internet sources consulted list the director as Bob Giraldi. Scorsese did, however, direct Michael Jackson's Bad (1987) video.

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**Conclusions: Dancing on a Volcano**

<sup>1</sup> The journalist, novelist and poet Emile Goudeau wrote in 1887 of French *fin-de-siècle* anxieties, “[i]n dancing on a volcano, gestures can well be sometimes a little epileptic” (Goudeau cited in Rearick, 1988, 39)

<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Eliane Beranger for this information.



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## **Filmography**

### An American in Paris (1951)

Director: Vincente Minnelli

Choreographers: Gene Kelly, Carol Haney and Alex Romero

### Anchors Aweigh (1945)

Director: George Sidney

Choreographer: Gene Kelly

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Arrivée d'un Train à la Ciotat, L' (Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat) (1895)

Directors: Auguste and Louis Lumière

A Star is Born (1954)

Director: George Cukor

Choreographer: Richard Barstow

Bad (1987)

Performer: Michael Jackson

Director: Martin Scorsese

Choreographers: Michael Jackson, Gregg Burge and Jeffrey Daniel

Ballet Mécanique (1924)

Directors: Fernand Léger and Dudley Murphy

Bas Fonds, Les (1936)

Director: Jean Renoir

Beat It (1983)

Performer: Michael Jackson

Director: Bob Giraldi

Choreographer: Michael Peters

Bête Humaine, La (1938)

Director: Jean Renoir

Black Diamond Express (1896)

Production Company: Edison Manufacturing Company

Director: James H. White

Blazing Saddles (1974)

Director: Mel Brooks

Choreographer: Alan Johnson

Bous-Bous Mie, La (1907/1909)

Director: variously attributed to Emile Cohl, Etienne Arnaud and Louis Feuillade

Cabaret (1972)

Director: Bob Fosse

Choreographer: Bob Fosse

Can-Can (1960)

Director: Walter Lang

Choreographer: Hermes Pan

Countryman and the Cinematograph, The (1901)

Director: Robert Paul

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Crissie Sheridan (1897)

Production Company: Edison Manufacturing Company

Danse du Ventre, La, (1900)

Director: Alice Guy

Danse Serpentine, 1900

Director: Alice Guy

Dirty Dancing (1987)

Director: Emile Ardolino

Entr'acte (1924)

Director: René Clair

Fire Dance (1906)

Choreographer: Loïe Fuller

Flashdance (1983)

Director: Adrian Lyne

Choreographer: Jeffrey Hornaday

French Cancan (1955)

Director: Jean Renoir

Choreographer: Claude Grandjean

Gentlemen Prefer Blondes (1953)

Director: Howard Hawks

Choreographer: Jack Cole

Grande Illusion, La (1937)

Director: Jean Renoir

Lady Marmalade (2001)

Performers: Christina Aguilera, Pink, Mya, and Lil' Kim

Producers: Missy Elliot and Rockwilder

Lys de la Vie, Le (1921)

Directors: Loïe Fuller and Georgette Sorrère

Material Girl (1985)

Performer: Madonna

Director: Mary Lambert

Metropolis (1927)

Director: Fritz Lang

Moulin Rouge (1928)



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Director: Ewald André Dupont

Moulin Rouge (1952)

Director: John Huston

Choreographer: William Chappell

Moulin Rouge! (2001)

Director: Baz Luhrmann

Choreographer: John O'Connell

Moulin Rouge Dancers (1898)

Production Company: American Mutoscope Company

Nana (1926)

Director: Jean Renoir

Nashville (1975)

Director: Robert Altman

On the Town (1949)

Directors: Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly

Choreographers: Gene Kelly, Carol Haney and Alex Romero

Parisian Dance (1897)

Production Company: Edison Manufacturing Company

Paris Qui Dort (1924)

Director: René Clair

Phantom of the Moulin Rouge, The (1925)

Director: René Clair

Princess Tam-Tam (1935)

Director: Edmond T. Gréville

Choreographers: Floyd Du Pont and Robert Rips

Producers, The (1968)

Director: Mel Brooks

Choreographer: Alan Johnson

Psycho (1960)

Director: Alfred Hitchcock

Quadrille Dansé par les Étoiles du Moulin-Rouge, 1900

Production Company: Pathé Frères

Queen of the Moulin Rouge (1922)

Director: Ray C. Smallwood

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Romeo + Juliet (1996)

Director: Baz Luhrmann

Choreographer: John O'Connell

Saturday Night Fever (1977)

Director: John Badham

Choreographers: Lester Wilson and Lorraine Fields

Save the Last Dance (2001)

Director: Thomas Carter

Choreographers: Fatima Robinson and Randy Duncan

Serpentine Dance by Annabelle (1896)

Director: William K. L. Dickson

Shadows of the Moulin Rouge (1913)

Director: Alice Guy

Singin' in the Rain (1952)

Director: Stanley Donen, Gene Kelly

Choreographers: Gene Kelly, Jeanne Coyne, Carol Haney and Gwen Verdon

Staying Alive (1983)

Director: Sylvester Stallone

Strictly Ballroom (1992)

Director: Baz Luhrmann

Choreographer: John O'Connell

Swing Time (1936)

Director: George Stevens

Choreographers: Hermes Pan and Fred Astaire

Top Hat (1935)

Director: Mark Sandrich

Choreographers: Hermes Pan and Fred Astaire

Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show (1902)

Production Company: Edison Manufacturing Company

Director: Edwin S. Porter

Variété (1925)

Director: Ewald André Dupont

Vogue (1990)

Performer: Madonna

Director: David Fincher

Choreographer: Karole Armitage

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*Voyage Dans La Lune, Le* (1902)  
Director: Georges Méliès